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MOLLY DENT;

OR,

A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM.

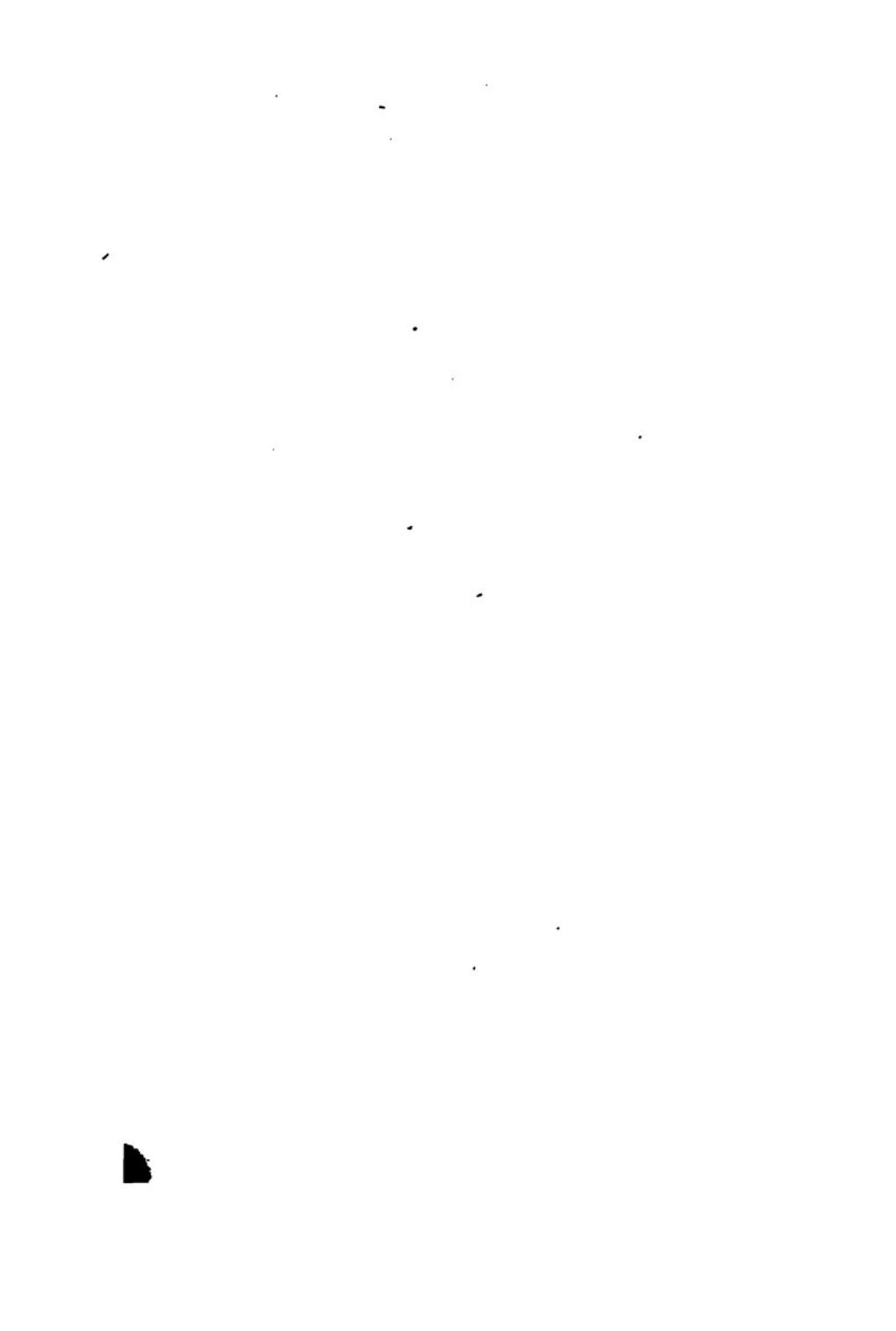
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MOLLY DENT;

OR,

A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM.

CHAPTER I.

Since service is the highest lot,
And all are in one body bound,
In all the world the place is not,
Which may not with this bliss be crowned.

This, by the ministries of prayer,
The loneliest lot with blessings crowds,
Can consecrate each petty care,
Make angels' ladders out of clouds.

word washerwoman would probably have been by which Molly Dent would have described own avocation, or which she would have ind on her signboard had she possessed one. hough such an appendage might have been

ornamental to Molly's two-roomed cottage, it would have been entirely useless in the case of any one who had resided for even a week in the village of Beaufront. Neither would the term have been satisfactory to any critical spirit; for, though it revealed the truth, it certainly did not reveal the whole truth. To have done so would have required a signboard which would have gone far to cover the entire wall of Molly's humble dwelling, and might even have taxed the genius of the minister himself, who was allowed on all hands to be the most learned man in the whole district. That she could wash, was most certain, as the ladies who came from London to visit at the Hall could testify. They declared they did not know their own clothes when they got them back again, and at last came to save up the laces that their grandmothers had left them, and all such like special treasures, for Molly's bleaching. True, Beaufront air and Beaufront sun had their share of the credit, but few knew how to put them to such good account as Molly. Indeed, it falls to the lot of but few washer-women to enjoy such celebrity in their own neighbourhood as she did, but then, on the other hand, where would you find another village that possessed

a washerwoman like her? It is true, if you had asked who the celebrities of the place were, no one would have thought of mentioning the washerwoman among them, but whenever any emergency arose in a household, the first thing that occurred to most people was to run for Molly Dent. When Mrs Thomson's mother was taken dangerously ill, and she was summoned to see her just when the pig was killed, no one can tell how the struggle between filial affection and housewifery would have ended, if she had not been able to assure Molly that she left the pig confidently in her hands, and knew everything would go on as well as if she had salted the hams and filled the puddings herself; and when the Colonel's brother arrived unexpectedly from India, with a wife, an ayah, and no one ventured to say how many children, it is impossible to say how bread could have been supplied to the hungry multitude, for bakers' shops were unknown in Beaufront; but Molly had a girdle cake ready for the children's tea, and a new batch of bread rising before the kitchen fire, before the pinafores were on, or the lady's company cap unpacked. And when, the very next day, Master Wilfred pitched head foremost into the pond, trying

to catch one of the gold-fish, and was brought in more dead than alive by a gardener who had heard the splash and fished him out, Molly had him in a warm bed and was rubbing him with hot flannels, before the terrified nurse had done anything but wring her hands ; and, indeed, brought him back to consciousness and soothed his mother out of her hysterics, long before the doctor had arrived. To be sure, this seemed nothing out of the way to the doctor, who was quite accustomed in his village practice, to find, that in nine cases out of ten, Molly had been first called in, and that it was only when she had declared the malady to be beyond her skill, he was summoned ; for she did not enjoy all this celebrity without paying a price for it, as perhaps we should find was the case with most of the heroes and heroines we read about, if we could see beyond the outside of the glory that surrounds them. We may sometimes be inclined to think that really they earned fame rather cheaply, when it was perhaps only one splendid action that came quite naturally in the course of their lives, that purchased it. But it is just this very thing, that it does come quite naturally into their lives, that is the glory. It might not seem at

all natural if it came in the course of yours or mine, and if we were required to go through all that led up to this one action that is all we read of, we might very possibly be inclined to cry off with our bargain, and think fame a very disagreeable purchase, before we were half-way to it. That our hero's great action seemed so natural, only means that he was *habitually* self-denying, and patient, and charitable, and thought of the interests of others before his own ; and it does not make him less heroic but more so, that he had practised all these things till they seemed to him the most natural things in the world to do. Certainly, Molly would have looked very much astonished, or have laughed heartily, if any one had dreamed of calling her a heroine, but she was in no such danger. Few people thought twice about it when they sent to ask if she would just step along and see what ailed the baby, or lend them a hand with something rather beyond their powers. And Molly would step along accordingly, and think no more of it than they did, though she might be just home after a heavy day's work, or be busy with a big washing at home. And many an hour that she might well have been justified in thinking she needed for rest, was spent beside sick-

beds that would otherwise have been lonely ; in short, she seemed to be as much the property of everybody as the village common ; her benefits were received as a matter of course, like the every day mercies of Providence, with as little notice, and, alas, that we should say it, often with as little gratitude.

If any of the neighbours ever thought of the matter at all, they generally explained it by saying that "Molly had seen a deal," which was true. They might have bettered the explanation by adding that she every day saw a deal more than they did. She saw that if a certain method of procedure made her clothes as white as snow one week, the same result might be expected from a similar treatment next week ; that if a certain combination of materials and a certain amount of cooking made excellent broth once, the same combination and cooking would be very likely to produce equally good food a second time ; that if a particular set of symptoms meant croup once, it was not safe to suppose they meant simple teething when they recurred.

But what the simple villagers meant by saying she had "seen a deal" was expressed in another form when they spoke of her having been in foreign parts

—a mysterious region whence she was supposed to have drawn much of her skill and experience. And to a certain extent it was true. She had visited various parts of the world with her husband who had been a soldier, and much of her readiness in resource was owing to the shifts to which she had often been put in the course of her wandering life. She was half a soldier in her orderly methodical habits, and very much preferred having things ship-shape, and every thing put to its own use. But if the appropriate article for any special use was not forthcoming, she was seldom at a loss to find something else that would do. And no doubt her experience in nursing had been acquired in the barracks as well as her unusual skill in all laundry operations. But if all these qualities were of foreign origin, the open mind was home-grown that knew what to choose and what to reject in her varied life. And so was the kindly nature that held her gifts as much for the benefit of others as for her own. For there is one class of people to whom the ordinary path of life always affords the best training, and there is another who never can find the exact sphere in which their gifts or virtues can be exercised. And Molly was of the



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must be told, at any sort of teaching except that of example. “Why I just do always the needfulest thing first, and I wash up everything as soon as I am done wi’ usin’ it” was all the account she could give of her appearing always to be “redd up.” “And its easy reddin’ when there’s nobody but yourself to redd after,” she would add sometimes, with a touch of sadness—which was perhaps the reason why she never seemed to be so put out as might have been expected, by meeting with dirt or untidiness in houses where there were six or eight children making a mess all round. She certainly applied herself with a will to the doing away with the mess, and she might perhaps say to their mother, “Eh, Bessy woman! I would teach them bairns that the one that makes a mess is the one that should redd it up;” or to one of the culprits, “now Kitty, get a cloth, like a clever lass, and see how well you can wipe down the table for mother.” But much beyond this her teaching powers did not go. In both these respects she was very unlike her friend Campbell, the old cook at the hall. Campbell had no patience for dirt or untidiness in any place or under any circumstances, and she had always a supply of wisdom for all comers, generally

done up in neat little parcels in the form of proverbs, which she would shower with great impartiality and in great profusion on every body who came near her. But there was great mutual respect between them. Molly looked on Campbell's book-learning with a kind of awe, while Molly's general capability, and the neatness and finish with which she turned out every piece of work she undertook, were exactly what Campbell could appreciate and approve. She could rely so implicitly in any press of work on Molly's doing all the ordinary roasting and boiling, that she could give all her faculties undisturbed to the higher mysteries of her art. And she found this the greater relief that, for some time before Molly's return to Beaufront, she had been exercised in spirit by a succession of "useless gude-for-naethin' hizzies," who made "mair slaistry than a' their work was worth." The Bessy above mentioned had been one of these, and was sometimes a cause of controversy between the two. "If ye could spare ony broken meat to Bessy Golightly," Molly would say, "I'm sure it would be a sair benefit to them, and little Kitty could come for it fine." "Eh, Molly woman," would be the answer, "I wunner to hear ye. I'se warrant ye, Bess 'll waste

as muckle ilka day as wad ser twa or three of them." "Hout no, Campbell, she would tell ye, poor soul, that she has nougnt to waste now." "Tell me ! ou ay, I doubt na she wad tell me. A yammerin' crater—gin either her hands or her heels was as clever as her tongue there's nane o' them a' need want either feedin' or cleedin'. But her man can make a gude wage and what should hinder her to gar't do ?" "But I'm misdoutin if he can he disna." "Then what for did she tak' him," Campbell would say fiercely—"she kent his kind ; and if she didna I tell't her, and that as she made her bed she maun lie on't. But there never was a silly Jocky but there was a silly Jenny." At this point Molly knew it was the path of wisdom to urge no further, but merely saying that it was "a gey hard bed for the bairns as well as for Bess," she would depart leaving this parting shot to do its work. This seldom failed to issue in a bountiful supply to the much maligned Bessy, for Campbell's bark, as she would have said herself, was much worse than her bite, and having delivered her conscience by a protest she felt quite at liberty to let her heart have its turn, and it was as great a pleasure to herself as to Molly to see the little hunger-bitten Kitty for once

get as much as she could eat, and to send her home with enough to make the hungry little ravens at home happy for a time at least. And so it was generally ; Campbell had the best of the argument, but with Molly, or rather with her protégées, remained all the substantial fruits of victory.

With all the other servants at the Hall, too, she was on friendly terms—she was so ready to do a turn for any of them ; and though her tongue was always both ready and plain-spoken it never brought her into trouble, for there was never the least touch of anything unkindly in it. But of all her friends there, none became eventually so close or so intimate as little Fred. It was on a baking day they first became acquainted, and Molly was busy getting her loaves into the pans, when raising her head, she saw a little figure standing in the doorway and regarding her with great earnestness. Now if Molly had a weakness it was for a curly-haired boy, and here was one just after her heart's pattern. So it was not long before she opened an acquaintance by asking, “ Must Molly bake a dow for you, little lovey ?” There was no reply, but he drew a step nearer, his eyes still fixed on her. Then after a little

pause: "Is 'ou Molly?" "Yes hinny, to be sure I am—and must I bake you a dowie." "Please" was now the unhesitating reply. He had judged her, or felt her, to be good, by the instinct which children in common with lower animals seem to possess, and which in their case appears to fade away as the nobler faculty develops. And having found a verdict in her favour he accepted her doings on faith, and took it for granted that a "dowie" would be something good though he had not the smallest idea what it was. Was he less or more wise than those among us who, professing to believe that all we receive comes from One who is wholly good, yet accept some of His gifts with reluctance and murmurs, or perplex and disquiet ourselves by asking "who will show us any good"?

"And what may your name be?" asked Molly presently. "Why I's Fred, o' course—did 'ou not know"? "Well, not quite, my little king, but I'll know now. And where were you goin'?" "I was seekin my hoop." "And where should it be dearie? Have you no place where you keep it?" "Oh yes; but that's just it; there's such a lot o' places; there's the toy press, and the hall, and under the libery sofa,

and on the beech tree, and ever so many more : and its always in the one I don't look in. But I don't care, now I may see you bake."

So he stood and saw Molly take off a little bit of dough, then put in a little sugar, and then a few currants, and finally print in currants on the top a splended F. for Fred. This done he trotted beside her to the oven, and with a great sigh of relief saw it finally deposited there. Then taking hold of Molly's apron, and with his head on one side and a kind of uncertain look that was to her quite irresistible, he said, "I should like to bake a dowie. And I'm sure Mabel would like one for her tea too." "But I doubt you'll mess your frock dearie," said soft-hearted Molly. "Oh no, Molly, I'll be so careful." So first she turned up his little black frock, then pulled up his sleeves, above his elbows, then she tied an apron round his neck with the strings crossing behind and coming round his waist ; and then she lifted him over the table into the window seat at the other side. No prince raised to the throne could have been more proud of his elevation than Fred, and for some time he was quite speechless from excitement, while he pounded and rolled at his little bit of dough, adding a little hand-

full of flour every now and then, as he had seen Molly do, and dabbing the currants in and picking them out again to put them in more eligible situations. Breathless with earnestness he at last sat back and surveyed with unmingle pride and delight a little hard black ball which no uninformed eye could have taken for anything but india-rubber. But moments so intense are generally brief, and Fred was no exception to the common lot. He had just as it were attained the summit of felicity, had taken but one draught of a hitherto untasted joy, when a voice recalled him to the common ground of every-day life. "Master Fred! Master Fred! where are you; we are all ready for our walk." Poor Fred, his face fell. Nurse was to him a kind of fate, occasionally pleasant, often severe, but always relentless. But on one point his feelings rose up in rebellion: he would appeal even against fate: not even Nurse should separate him from his beloved *dow*.

"Just look, nurse," he said, stretching it out, and then clutching it back against his white apron, and holding it tight with both hands. "Why! what mess is this you've been making, Master Fred?" said she. "Mess, Nurse! I'se been bakin, and look,"

opening his hands a little way. "Perhaps I should not have let him stay, little dear," said Molly. - but I think his dress is nothing the worse." And she lifted him to the floor, and shook down his little skirt. After a suitable interchange of civilities between the opposing powers, the struggle ended in Molly's taking charge of the *dow* to see it properly baked, and nurse promising that he should be allowed to have both dows sent up for nursery tea.

At tea time Fred again appeared with the nursery maid, to make sure there should be no mistake. So Molly claimed a kiss as a reward, and got a very hearty hug from the little fellow. Seeing the shutters still open, he ran to the window, crying out, "Oh Molly, such beautiful stars as you've got here—but you know there's stars in India, too, the same as come here." Then in a softer voice he went on, "You know Mamma used to show me them. When I was little I used to think they all ran about and would knock up against each other, but you know she teached me that God had made a little roadie for each of them, so they never go the wrong way. He made roadies for us too, you know, and mine came all the way across the sea in the ship.

Little sister's was very short, and went right up to God." "Eh ! bless him," said Molly, kissing him again, "but I hope your way will be a right long one, my little man, and Mamma's too." But at that poor Fred with a sudden shudder hid his face in her gown and sobbed, and the nursery maid gave her such a warning shake of the head, that she saw she had committed a grave mistake. The little black frock met her eye, and at once she guessed the truth, that little Fred was the orphan nephew who had come home with his cousins from India, the child of the Colonel's youngest brother, Master Robert, who had been but a child when Molly married and left Beaufort, and whose sad fate had been mourned throughout the village as well as at the Hall. He and his young wife had both fallen in the mutiny, and by what means the poor ayah had escaped with Fred she could never clearly explain. When she arrived at the station where his uncle was in command, both nurse and child were too terrified and excited to be able to give any comprehensible account of what had taken place. Indeed the poor child was so ill that they scarcely hoped he would recover from the effects of the terror and the hardships he had come through. But

when he had become acquainted with his little cousins, for at first he was shy of all but the baby, who reminded him of the baby sister he had lost, he seemed to forget his troubles much more quickly than the poor nurse who had understood their dangers better. The voyage home, too, with its new world of discoveries, had done wonders for him. But though a new life quickly overlaid the old, the old was not forgotten, and they often came on a vein of memories in wholly unexpected ways. "Indeed," as old Campbell said to Molly, after Fred had been kissed and comforted and carried off with his precious dow carefully held in his pinafore, "it was nae wonder if them that had seen it couldna forget—to hear tell o't was eneuch to pit maist onything oot o' a'bodys heid. 'Twas like naething but the book o' Martyrs or the French Revolution, and that nicht when they cam' hame and the black woman telt me aboot it when she was gettin' her tea (and deed Molly woman I was kind o' feared to look at her for fear she would see the scunner I couldna help at her colour—but 'twasna but skin deep wi' her) weel that nicht I thocht when I went to my bed that I never wad hae sleepit mair. I was fain to tak' to

the Question Book to pit the gruesome thochts o' my heid, and I'll assure you I had gane owre six leaves to mysel' in my bed or ever I stikit an e'e." And Molly did not wonder, but felt her heart go out more than ever towards the child to whom she had felt a great drawing even before she heard his history. "Bless the poor motherless lamb," she said, as she went home, her heart full of many things. Foremost among these were the thought of India, and the idea of the *way* of which the child had spoken so undoubtingly. But to understand how familiar the first of these was to Molly, even when her hands were busiest, it will be necessary to retrace a part of her story.

It was not so much that she had lived so long there as to have felt almost at home in the country, nor even that it was there her husband had received the wounds of which at last he died. It was more the thought of what perhaps it was now, than what it had been to her, that drew her heart continually to it. It was only a perhaps, for alas she could only guess that her Willy, her one remaining child, might be there. He was her youngest, and the only one she had left, and he had 'listed and gone, as she feared,

in anger—gone at all events without a word, and for nine long years she had heard nothing of him. She had hoped for his return and feared to hear of his death, till hope was almost dead, and fear had almost grown to certainty. If he was alive, surely he must have written. He had been wild and had rebelled at the restraints she had tried to put on him, but his heart was always warm, and the poor mother sat night after night by her lonely fire, and lived over again through all his early years, and dwelt fondly on days so full of promise that she had thought her Willy had surely been given to her to make up for all the sons and daughters she had lost. The regiment into which he had enlisted was now in India, but whether he was still in it or not, of course she did not know. To her neighbours she never mentioned his name, not so much from pride, as from a feeling that her grief was one which none of them could measure. Which of them had had a son like Willy? and which of them could understand how close a tie had for long seemed to knit together mother and son. So she went on her lonely way, putting so much heart and purpose into her work that none dreamed

of the busy inner life that ran alongside the active outer one.

But the child's words awakened other thoughts. Was the way which seemed so broken off, and diverted from the one in which she had expected to walk when she set out, really the way which God had laid out for her ? It seemed to correspond to some things in her husband's last words, and brought them back vividly and fresh to her memory.

From the time when he had been discharged from the hospital cured of his wounds, but unfit for service, Molly's one thought had been to bring him home to Beaufront. His native air she was sure would revive him, and her skilful hands would soon find enough of work to supplement his small pension, and keep them in comfort till little Willy should be old enough to support them both. Alas, both these cherished hopes had been disappointed. They had only reached Malta when poor Tom who had suffered terribly during the whole voyage, became so ill as to be unfit to go further. He lingered for a month or two, and the last weeks of his life proved to be the most eventful in his history. He was visited by the Chaplain of the Garrison, and at their first interview the two

men were drawn to one another by a simplicity and sincerity of nature common to both.

Mr. A. was young, and himself very much of an invalid. Indeed his life had been one long struggle for health, and he had scarcely hoped ever to enjoy as much vigour as the change to a warm climate had given him. But this living face to face with death had given a wonderful reality and distinctness to his views of another life, and set him wonderfully free from much that is apt to embarrass in the present. This world and another seemed to run into one another with so little of a barrier between them, that heaven seemed as real as earth, and earth as much home as heaven. The world was part of his Father's house, his fellow-men, his Father's children, and so he was at home wherever he happened to find himself, and in whatever company. With a little of the dreaminess of a scholar he did not take note of minor distinctions. He was interested in men, but the differences of position and rank did not affect him, and the gentle, almost languid courtesy of his manner was the same to Tom Dent as it would have been to his colonel. This languor gave him at times an appearance of indifference to what was going on,

and was only too evidently the effect of a constant weakness, but when his sudden smile broke out it was like the sun breaking through the clouds, and illuminating a winter landscape. You saw then the wealth of life, and beauty and sweetness that were buried for a while under the rigours of the season—or, as it struck Tom—it was as if you had suddenly opened up a lantern. An affection quickly grew up between the two. Tom had had a vague feeling that life and everything that was real was passing away, and in his shadowy picture of a life beyond his mind could fix on little that was definite. Neither did that little afford him any comfort. But as Mr. A. spoke, it seemed to him as if he awoke from a dream. He saw that it was the visions that lay behind him, the realities that were yet to come. “I know, Molly lass, thou’dst fain ‘a brought me home, and it would ‘a been pleasant to see the bonny Beaufront woods again, and the deans where I played wi’ thee when we were bairns, and to ‘a lain aside mother and all the old folks at home. But I think it was the Lord who brought me here, and thee must na fret that He is taking me a shorter way. You see I always thought to have a while to read my book as the old mother

used, and to seek the Lord before I died, but now I see its Him that's all my life been seekin' me. To think I should 'a lived all these years and never to 'a known that He loved me! I knew, to be sure, that the Lord Jesus died for sinners, and I knew that I was a sinner; but I never saw how the two things fitted into each other, and how it was for me He died. It's altogether strange, only that we are His creatures, and so I suppose He had pity on us—'like as a father pitith His children,' as Mr. A. says. But yet its beyond me. But that's no wonder either, for He's all beyond me. At first I was scared to think o' leavin' you Molly, and the old life, for if it had its troubles we've had a vast o' pleasure and comfort too, and it was kind, and warm, and familiar like, and I did not know what was to come, and I was afraid of the Judge on His throne and the last day. But now I see He has taken it all on Himself, and the Judge is our Father in Heaven —our Father, Molly; and to go to Him is like going home. And you must come and the lad. He'll show thee the way. I have asked Him, and He has given me so much," he said with a smile, "that somehow I think He won't deny me this. But thou must

ask Him, Molly, and teach the lad—He has promised, you know.’’

And so Tom Dent passed to the Home of which he had so lately taken thought. The seed sown so late seemed in the few weeks to take root, and spring up, and bring forth fruit an hundredfold. And the young chaplain went on his way cheered and strengthened, but not surprised, for, like Tom Dent, he seemed to think nothing too great to expect from the Divine love.

As for poor Molly, her heart was so full of grief, that she only half took in the meaning of Tom’s words, her eyes were so blinded by tears that she could follow him no further than the grave-yard where she laid him and left him alone in that strange land. She held his last charge too sacred not to do her best to fulfil it, so she prayed and taught her boy to pray, but it was to a God afar off, to whom she would never have thought of unbosoming the troubles of her everyday life.

On her way home, she had gone to visit her only sister, who had taken charge of Willy in his mother’s absence. And Marjory would gladly have had Molly stay beside her in the busy town where she lived. “Thou’rt kindly welcome, Molly, as thee know’st,

and Richard would make thee welcome too. He's always ta'en to thee, Molly, and would try to be a brother to thee, and I often say he's prouder o' little Will than of his own, and thinks nought wrong 'at he can do. As for work, thee'st too clever to need to ask twice for't, and Willy will soon be big enough to fend for hisself."

But Molly longed for home. The cottage where she had lived when she was first married was only a stone's throw from the one where she was born, and though neither husband nor parents were left, she thought she would feel less lonely there. The sight of the old Hall, and the smell of the fir woods, and the sound of the old church bell, and of the crows going home in the evening, would help to cure the sickness of her heart, for Molly knew that part of what she felt was a sickness, a sickness that should be cured. Never, never could she forget her Tom, but it would have been a poor tribute to the memory of one so kind, to forget in her own grief to give a helping hand to any one in like trouble. Rather, she felt that it lay with her who knew how sore a burden life might be, to comfort the sorrowful and sick at heart. Her sympathy was never very loud or talkative, but

instinctively the sorrowful felt that Molly knew how heavy the burden was, and was pained in her heart along with them.

So, amid the kindly influences of nature, to which she had trusted, and in simple everyday services among her neighbours, and in honest work, she was soothed and strengthened day by day, till her weariness of life, and her indifference to all things, passed away. And Willy was the delight of her eyes and the joy of her heart.

Still, the thought would come, as she sat by her fireside after he was asleep at night, that the ways of Providence were unequal. Why was it that Marjory, who was married on the same day as herself, had her house full of children and their father to work for them ? She was far from envying her sister her prosperity, she heartily rejoiced in it, but it seemed to her that she had somehow missed her way in life. And when Willy left her, and she felt that his father's eye and hand would surely have kept him in the right way, then it seemed to her that she had never known what trouble was till now, and rebellious thoughts that had never come at her husband's death, would not be denied entrance now. Death

had taken Tom from her, but had made him none the less hers that he was hidden from her sight. All was well with him. But life had dealt more cruelly by her, for her other treasure had been swept from her, and who could tell whose prey he might have become. She knew too much of the life of a soldier not to shudder at the thought.

But if God watched over the ways of each individual man as over the stars in their courses, then none of all these things had come to her by accident. Could it be that even now God knew her path and was leading her by a right way? The echoes of her husband's dying words awoke once more as they had often done before, for though the multifarious works of her busy life often dulled her ear to these half-comprehended sayings, they were never far distant from her and a chance word would re-awaken them.

Along the foot of the Hall garden ran a little stream which Fred was fond of watching and in which he had sometimes even got leave to fish with a thread and a crooked pin. He never caught anything but his delight in the pursuit was scarcely diminished by this circumstance, and his ardour not at all. Higher up and just where the stream

issued from the beautiful Beaufront woods it deep into a pool, black from its depth and from the hanging branches. Fred never passed this spot without begging to be allowed to throw a stone into water that he might hear the "*boom*" as he To-night his little hand had thrown a stone into current of Molly's life, and had sounded one of deepest pools. It stirred it to its depths, which back a hollow echo, but no sunlight cleared up shadows or irradiated the mysteries that lay in dark recesses.

But to the child as to her husband, the thing which they spoke seemed altogether real and stantial and Molly longed more than ever that could understand it all.





CHAPTER III.

"I will bring the blind by a way they know not."

HE visitors at the Hall departed at length, but Fred, who had been arranged, was left under the guardianship of his uncle. He continued to be a puny, delicate child, with plenty of spirit, but with very little of anything else as the Colonel complained. The doctor said he might outgrow the shock his nervous system had evidently received, but wisely did little to assist me and nature, except prescribe plenty of fresh air, and plenty of fun, and no attempt at lessons. All these conditions seemed to be fulfilled ; the nursery resounded with merriment, and walks were taken daily, but Fred grew no rosier, ate scarcely anything, and often awoke in a sudden panic which he could not explain. "Couldn't you invent anything that would make this little chap eat," his uncle appealed to old Campbell one day, when he met her coming out of her room, with a pot of jam for the nursery

tea in one hand and leading Fred in the other. "Deed and I wish I could, sir," she said. "It was certainly the last thing anybody would have needed to do for his poor Father at his age, dear old fellow," said the Colonel, "or indeed for any of us. I wonder how it is, poor little man—eh ?" "Weel sir, gin ye pit the question to me I would just make bold to say that it's my opinion he's owre clean keepit." "Ower clean keepit," said the bewildered Colonel, "I'm sure we were kept clean enough—it makes me gasp yet to remember how old nurse used to pinion us, and there was nothing for it but to shut your eyes and mouth, hold your breath, and get through it at the quickest." "Hout ay, sir," said Campbell smiling—"I'm no meanin' his skin, but his claes. There's nae manner o' doot but auld Betsy made sure you had a' a clean skin ance a day, but I'm thinking there wasna mony a mud hole but ye kent yer way to, nor mony a day that ye didna need a gude bit o' reddin' up after ye were safe into the house for the nicht." "That's true at any rate," said the Colonel laughing. "I daresay I've made as many mud-pies in my day as you have made pigeon ones, and to be wet through was all in the day's work." "Weel, ye see, sir, it used to be you and

no your claes was the main thing, noo it's a' the ither way, and if a bairn canna do this and canna do that for fear o' hurtin' his claes, it's like they'll get mair justice than he does." Fred understood and approved of Campbell's sentiments most vehemently, and his uncle made a great agitation on the subject that very evening, insisting on *nankeen* as the proper and only dress for little boys. It was this *he* had worn, and it never was anything the worse however often it was washed. His wife assured him such a material was hardly attainable now, but he justly urged that there must be something to dress them in that would not spoil, and he kept an eye on Fred's dress for some time after, and never was quite happy about him when he saw him in anything but a great brown Holland overall, which most nearly came up to the fondly remembered *nankeen* of his own childhood. And he would sometimes take him out for a walk with himself and show him the trees his Father used to climb, and the broad ditch over which he had made a celebrated leap, and the housie they had built in the woods, with the elaborate arrangements for supplying it with water, which had every advantage except that the only source of supply was the said muddy ditch.

And he allowed him to grub about for flowers, or acorns, or pebbles, or anything else that was desirable, and was never more delighted than when he brought him in with hands in a state that shocked his aunt, and irritated the nurse. And of course these times were great holidays for Fred too, for his uncle and he never tired of each other's company.

Between Fred and Molly, too, there quickly grew up a friendship of the closest sort,—a friendship so very real that it shared the proverbial fate of all true love, and did not always run very smooth. Fred knew by instinct when Molly was in the house, and where to find her, and, moreover, the same useful faculty speedily made him aware that in heart she was as great a culprit as himself, and had an equal delight in those stolen interviews. In truth, Molly was continually torn between grief at the trouble the poor child constantly ran into for her sake, and a thirsting to see the little face, which speedily became dear to her in a degree unaccountable even to herself. And Fred's enjoyment of his treasures never seemed complete till he was sure of Molly's approval of them, and had claimed her sympathy. These treasures were of course of the most varied description. He would

burst into the wash-house with three young guinea-pigs in his pinafore, another time it would be such a beauty puddock, again it was two blind puppies, the mother following with a wistful look, as if quite aware that no evil was intended, but still rather doubtful of the ability of their guardian.

Picture books, toys, and wonderful machines of his own contrivance, all had to be submitted to Molly's inspection. And no baking-day passed without a visit from Fred. Sometimes he had only time to rush in like a little whirlwind, when he was swept from the scene by a justly incensed nursery-maid ; sometimes he planned his visits more skilfully, and would be in all the rapture of baking a dow, before his absence was discovered. It grieved Molly sorely to think of the punishments that often awaited the poor child, on account of his frequent escapes ; and at last she would smother him with kisses, promise him a dowie fit for a king, and send him desponding back to the upper regions. But his transgressions in this way were so frequent, that at last his aunt made a solemn appeal to her husband, representing that he was always flying about among open doors, acquiring habits of haunting the kitchen, and that as Molly was

sure to be in any house in the village where there was sickness, it was not possible that Fred should escape catching *something*. Thus solemnly adjured, the poor colonel was at last brought to the desired point, and bound himself over to punish Fred on the next delinquency. He tried to defend himself against such a thing occurring, by exhorting the nurse to vigilance, and was comforted to see how awe-struck Fred looked when he warned him gravely of what would happen. Alas, it was only next day that he was roused from his afternoon nap to deal with the culprit. He had not dreamed of having to go into action so soon, as he expressed it. But the suddenness of the call had the advantage of raising a little irritation, partly at himself, partly at Fred, mostly, it is to be feared, at his wife. However, he went through his duty like a man. Fred took the punishment like a man too ; then hiding his face in his uncle's waistcoat, sobbed out, "Please may I go to Molly now, uncle." This was too much for the poor colonel. He declared to his wife that nothing should ever tempt him to lift his hand to poor Bob's boy again. Tom Dent was as brave a soldier as ever faced a scoundrelly Sikh, and Bob would never have

hindered his boy from keeping company with Molly. She had been known at the Hall all her life, and the child would learn no harm from her. As for infection, she was not more likely to bring it than anyone who might be coming about, and Fred was not more likely to take anything than anyone else in the house. He believed he was too much cooped up, and would be better if he were allowed more run, as they had had when they were boys ; and, in short, he would not have the child bullied. So it ended in Fred's having more liberty instead of less, and for some time he revelled in a paradise of baking-days. It is impossible to say which of the two was happiest, when, the labours of the day over, and Fred having been an extra good boy, he got leave to have tea with Molly. Of course she always had a special white cake baked for him on these happy evenings, and the cutting of it on the girdle, and the subsequent buttering and piling on the plate were scarcely less interesting than the eating of it.

But the delight of the time was when Fred got on to Molly's knee at the fireside, and composing himself in a comfortable attitude, demanded " now Molly, a story." And from the stores of her memory and her

own experience there was always a story forthcoming, and the one newly finished was always the "very most splendid" he had ever heard. Thrilling escapes from serpents and lions, adventures of travel, anecdotes of her own childhood, fairy tales, and historical ballads all came out of Molly's treasury, and of the whole collection none was more frequently called for than "sumfin 'bout Willy." And as she told story after story, showing how brave her boy was, and how kind and how loving, and as Fred's great eyes glistened at the record, she forgot for the time how changed all was now. Sometimes the recall from such dreams was sudden and painful. Once Fred in an access of delight and of eagerness to see this hero of so many adventures broke out with "When will he come? Where is he?" The question stabbed Molly to the heart. For a moment she was still, as if suddenly turned to stone; then clasping him tight to her she moaned out "Oh, where is he? where is he?" The change from her usual bright mood was so sudden, and so incomprehensible to Fred, that he was frightened. He only saw that Molly was grieved so he stroked her face softly till he saw her quieter, and then in his childish tones he asked, "Is Willy

lost? you know God sees in the dark and everywhere, so He will take care of him, and I'll ask him to bring him home. I'll ask every night till he comes. For you know mama said I was never to stop prayin' if I did not get the thing directly, because God always hears what I say, only He waits till the right time."

For Fred had a hundred stories of mama, and was never tired of talking of her, and Molly was never tired of listening. Of his father he had no very distinct recollection, having seen little of him in the last months of his life. But in these troubled times he had been his mother's constant companion, and living as they did on the brink of destruction, her chief endeavour had been to prepare her child for the eternity they might so soon and so suddenly enter. This belief that he was to ask God for whatever he wanted, and that God would give it to him if it was good for him, he held with unquestioning faith. " You know God *likes* to give me things," he would say, " only when I was little I sometimes wanted foolish things, like when the pretty serpent came in at the window and I was going to catch it to play with, but mama wouldn't let me, and afterwards it went out again, and Nero tried to bite it, and it bited him and he died." " And per-

haps," he ingenuously added, "I am not quite wise like big people yet." Molly was silent, but she thought she would be glad if she understood as much as had been revealed to this babe.

The idea of the *way* had a never failing interest for her, and on one particular evening it seemed to her as if a new light had appeared in her sky, clearing up in some degree what had so perplexed her. The nursery-maid had come to carry Fred off to bed, at what he thought must be an unreasonably early hour, and in order to prolong the time a little, he begged that he might read his verses beside Molly. The girl, like every one else in the house but nurse and her mistress, was rather the slave of her little master, and went to bring his Bible, while Fred explained that his mama always used to read a few verses and explain them to him, before he went to bed, and that he had begun to read them himself as soon as he was able, and she had told him always to do it, "All my life, even when I am a big man," as he added. "But you see I've nobody to 'spain them now—only p'raps you can," he eagerly said, as the idea suddenly seized him. And Molly dared not tell him how little she was able to explain, and was relieved when

the return of the maid saved her from the embarrassment of answering. It was like a miracle to her to hear how he read, the little voice skipping from one big word to another, and rippling on between, like a little brook over the pebbles, as she thought,—indeed she had never dreamed of his being able to read at all, especially as he was rather backward than otherwise in speaking. But he tucked her arm round him and under his own, as he sat on her knee, and using her finger for a pointer, went on without the slightest hesitation, the big words appearing to cause him rather less trouble than in speaking. For a minute or two she was more interested in the reading than in what was read, but at last her attention was arrested by the words, “O that there were such a heart in them, that they would fear me and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them and with their children for ever!” There Fred paused as if considering, and then said, “He cares a great deal, I suppose, does He?” “I suppose so,” said Molly. “Does it mean the same as ‘My son give me thine heart?’—that’s one of my texts, you know.” “I suppose so,” again said Molly. “’Cos I know that’s what He died for,—to make us good—

so He must care a great deal." To this Molly had nothing to say ; but after the reading was finished, and the good-nights said, and she was home to her own fireside, the words kept saying themselves over and over to her, "Oh that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them and with their children for ever !" She found them in her big Bible, that she might read them again, and read on till she came to the words, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart : and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." Here she stopped, not daring to read further. Alas, alas, how different from this had been her training. She had taught her son, indeed, to abhor a lie as a mean and hateful thing, and had shown such horror of the least beginnings of sloth and self-indulgence, that he had come to think that it was only in as far as he was industrious

and upright, that he could be worthy of the name of man at all. But to love and fear God so that the whole life should be penetrated by the thought of Him—it was like the language of another world to her. So were the child's words,—“He must care a great deal, it was that he died for.” Her mind was in a tumult. Had she done otherwise, would it have been well with her now and with her son ; and well with them for ever ? What had she been dreaming of ? How could she have gone on so forgetful of her husband's warnings. And as her mind went ranging blindly in the dark, seeking for her lost son, and unable to find him, the thought burnt itself into her heart that she had destroyed him. And as the days went by, this feeling did not pass away, but deepened, till her life seemed heavier than she could bear, and all the troubles that had come upon her but so many proofs of God's displeasure. She dared not read more, she could not pray, she feared the evenings when her work was done, and she could no longer banish thought by ceaseless doing. She almost shrank when, a few evenings after, Fred again proposed to read to her, lest it should but seal the terrible judgment she had passed on herself. It was

still the wilderness story, and still the words seemed addressed to herself ; but this time there was healing as well as smiting in them. It seemed much more pointed in the child's reading of it than in her own somewhat stumbling attempts, and certainly she had never felt any written or spoken words appeal more directly to her than when she heard herself called on to "remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments or no. And He humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know : that He might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord, doth man live." This was not all bitter, but she had hardly time to take in the meaning, before there fell like dew on her burning heart, the saying that, "As a man chasteneth his only son, so the Lord, thy God, chasteneth thee." This was very full for her. Did not she know with what a heart of love it is that a son is chastened ; and was it so that God was dealing with her ? Yes, it surely

ast be true, for over again it was told how God had ought them through the great and terrible wilderness, bringing water for them from the rock, and feeding them with manna, to humble them and to prove them, and *to do them good at their latter end*. And was not this her own story? Was it not true that as she had come through the wilderness, she had been smitten sometimes sorely but never forsaken; she had had the manna day by day; all that was needful for food, and shelter, and raiment, had been supplied. And perhaps the destroying of her home over which she had so murmured, might only be the stirring of her p from her rest, that she might reach onward to this promised land of inheritance, the rest that remaineth for ever. For she came to identify her story so entirely with the wilderness journey, that she found continually something new to fit her own case, and instead of dreading to hear, she was so eager that all other stories were laid aside while she followed the children of Israel through all their journey, their unbelief and hardness of heart, their repents sooon and so utterly forgotten. And still there was the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, and the Lord's tent in the midst of their tents, and still,

upon every repentance deliverance was wrought, and still the promise was not withdrawn, that God should be their God for ever, and their Guide even unto death. It was not all comfort she got, the feeling that she was like the idolatrous nations who had given up their children to be burnt in the fire, was often stronger than anything she could get to set against it. But gradually the light got clearer ; she felt that though she had destroyed herself, in God there was still help. She saw bitterly how much was now impossible for herself and for Willy too, if, indeed, his time of possibilities were not altogether past, but she saw too how much was yet attainable, and clung to it all the more strongly for what she had lost. From her blind groping in search of him, her heart came home to the mercy-seat and found refuge there.

The very source from which she drew so much, this little child, who was like a fountain in the wilderness through which the well springs of salvation reached her, made her feel her own neglect all the more, for might not her son have been such another. And through all their readings his simple comments had opened up things to Molly and had furnished much

of the explanation which he had looked for from her. Not that he had any idea that he was explaining, or indeed that there was anything to explain. It seemed very bad to him that they should forget so often ; and with all the assurance of untried valour, he was certain he would never have done so. But on the other hand, to the child's simplicity there was no difficulty in believing that God would bring them to the land. There could be no doubt about it. He was faithful and He had promised. And in the case of the children of Israel, Molly did not doubt either. She saw all through that it closely concerned God's own glory to bring them to the promised end, even in the face of their shortcomings and rebellions. It was only because the parallel case was her own, and therefore, was so all-important that she felt it difficult to keep pace with the unhesitating faith of the child. And yet she could not set it aside as childish ignorance could not indeed but feel compelled to yield herself up to this guidance, so unconscious and easy and yet apparently so unchallengeable. For Fred was just as sure that he was to be kept safely to the end as that the children of Israel were to get to the promised land at last. And it was not to be denied

that he seemed to have just as good ground for confidence as for the other. The words he could bring in proof were very few and very simple, "but surely," Molly caught herself up in the midst a doubt that those things were not for her, "surely am not wanting something more than God's bare word!" "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." "I am the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand." These and few similar texts he could repeat, having learned them first from a book which was his chief treasure and which Molly looked on with eyes almost reverent as his own. It was a book written out for him by his mother, beginning with short texts and hymns, such as he was able to understand now, and going on to other things which would be of more use to him hereafter. Sometimes, he told Molly, his uncle would read him a new one on Sunday evenings and hear him say over those he knew already. The book had been given shortly before his mother's death and owed its preservation to that circumstance; for it was still so great a novelty that it had been taken

to bed with him on that terrible night when he had been snatched from the jaws of death. The poor ayah had looked upon it as a kind of charm, and felt somehow as if it had helped to bring them through in safety. Some of its sacred words had been taught to her as well as to the child, by her kind mistress, and doubtless she still carried them in her memory, to be the germ perhaps of new harvests in that land to which she had returned, and which had undergone such terrible processes of upturning.

Molly did not make much of reading this book, but the short texts which Fred knew were enough to throw many a side-light on the story that interested them both. Indeed, now that Molly's interest was awakened, it seemed as if things bore in on it from all quarters. The psalms and prayers and lessons at church were full of the theme, and at home she never wearied of going over and over and over again those wonderful psalms that record the defeats and triumphs of the wilderness journey, and gather up into a short panorama all the shame and all the glory that ran through it all. She could understand it better so, after having heard the details traced chapter by chapter in the historical books. And

while she felt humbled that every word of confession could be made so truly her own, she could not altogether reject the conclusion that as these others of whom it was said that "they despised the pleasant land ; they believed not his word" yet were heard when at every new trouble they cried unto the Lord, so she also might cry and be delivered and might be led by a right way to a city of habitation.

And so life took a new colouring for Molly, became something new altogether. She had a new hope, a new home, a new purpose, a new or newly understood tie to her dead husband, and a new friend on whom to lay her cares for her lost son. Her very face took a new expression, and showed the glow of a hidden life and fire which had not been there before. To Fred it was hardly possible to take any more loving relation, and yet they seemed to grow more and more into one another's nature every day. And she talked freely to the child about Willy, of whom she spoke to none else, and she rejoiced continually, in knowing that his promise was never forgotten, that he would ask God to take care of Willy every day till he came back again.

And just when their friendship had reached this

height, and seemed full of everything good to both of them, it was threatened with danger of a termination as sudden as its beginning had been. Mrs Peareth's favourite bugbear of infection became at last only a reasonable fear, for fever broke out in the village and many cases proved fatal, so that many besides the lady at the Hall grew suspicious of whom they admitted within their doors. She would hear of no middle or compromising course. Molly must be forbidden even the most distant intercourse with the Hall and, it was only because Mrs Peareth had no power of jurisdiction that she was not forbidden the church too. And no doubt she really did see more cases than any one but the doctor ; and though she was not rash in mixing with people without taking precautions, yet she submitted with a sort of feeling that it was right. Was this part of the way too ? It must be so, and though she missed her little guide and fellow-traveller to help her to see the land marks, she did not loiter on her journey, or cease trying to spell out as best she might the safest and most assured course. Evidently it was not in man that walketh to direct his steps. And since behind her lay shame and repentance, and before perplexity and anxiety, it

was apparent that the only course for her was to look up, and to take the next step by such light as might be granted to her.





C H A P T E R I V.

“Lord, mend or rather make us : one creation
Will not suffice our turn :
Except thou make us daily we shall spurn
Our own salvation.”

WHICH of us has not experienced that when we have taken every precaution against trouble, and defended ourselves on every side from which it appears likely to come, it bears down on us from some quarter wholly unexpected and unprepared for? “You may steeke every door,” as old Campbell said, “but if its to be, it will fin’ its way through the window.” And such was her mistress’s experience on this occasion. This time, however, it came in not by the window, but was supposed at least to come in by the great hall door, and to arrive there in the doctor’s carriage. The baby looked heavy one morning, and little Mabel complained of sore throat, and in great alarm the distracted mother sent a groom to seek the doctor till he found him, and to bring him back with him if

possible. He encountered him coming out of a cottage where five children were laid down with fever, in one small stifling room, and telling him something very serious was wrong, gave such an alarming picture of the state of matters at the hall, that in five minutes he was in the nursery, and found the baby in an uproarious state of merriment, Mabel and Fred running at him in turn, and trying which could roar loudest. Fred immediately explained that he was a jackal, and Mabel a gorilla, and that Mabel thought her roar was the best, because her papa had told her the gorilla's was the most hideous roar of any, but then as he had heard a jackal, she ought to see that he must know most about it. The doctor they considered had just come in time to settle the point and a performance was instantly volunteered. This the poor provoked doctor declined, though he could not help laughing at his own haste, in coming to the relief of symptoms so violent. But he compromised the matter by giving the jackal and the gorilla each a ride on his shoulder before setting out on his rounds again. "So dreadfully imprudent," wailed poor Mrs Peareth afterwards, quite ignoring the fact that it was her own

imprudence that had led to the doctor's. The groom told where he had met the doctor, and nothing could ever alter Mrs Peareth's fixed belief, probably well-founded, that it was he who had brought infection to the hall, when shortly afterwards poor little Fred sickened, and his illness was pronounced to be fever of a very bad type. From the beginning almost it affected his head, and in his wanderings he talked so much of Molly and asked so often to see her that as the mischief was already done she was allowed to see him.

She had run to the hall at the first news of his illness, and so was not far to seek. She found the doctor and Mrs Peareth in the outer nursery, in consultation as to what was to be done, or rather found the doctor suggesting various plans and the lady rejecting them. She would have taken the whole family from the house at once, leaving Fred in possession, but for the consideration that the other children might already have taken the disease, though it had not shown itself as yet. If so it was most desirable they should not be removed to a strange place or left to the care of a strange doctor. For notwithstanding his "dreadful im-

prudence," the doctor was one to be thoroughly believed in. At once a plan darted into Molly's mind, but she dared not mention it to Mrs Peareth, so she passed on quietly to the inner room, where poor little Fred lay tossing and moaning. But he smiled as she came near and asked him how he was. "Oh, I'm quite well," he said, "if you would only lay me in the pond beside the gold-fish I'd be quite comfy." But then he went off to something else, and Molly was more fixed than ever in her plan. So when the doctor came, in a few minutes, to see the patient, she was ready for him. "Now, doctor, hinny," she began, "if you would just let me carry the dear lamb down by, you would see how I would do for him, and it would just save you and the missis a vast o' consideration. You know what my bed's like, and you know whether I have any skill, and if watching day and night will do the jewel good it's that he should have, and it's glad I would be to do it. But the missis would na hearken to me, so you must just bring her round, doctor dear, as you know you can if you will." And so he could, as it proved, though at first she received the proposal with indignation. Her husband at once approved

of the plan, and at last, moved by the representations made by both, of Molly's skill as a nurse, and of the spotless cleanliness of everything about her, but especially by the consideration that she could see nothing else that could be done, she consented.

Molly flew to make her preparations, and before there was time for Mrs Peareth to have changed her mind, the carriage drew up at her door, and the doctor carried in the little patient, wrapped in blankets, and quite unconscious of his journey. And a happy woman was Molly when she saw him laid among her new blankets, for at this early stage of his illness she would admit no considerations of danger. So she received the doctor's instructions as to what was required, made what little arrangements were necessary for the event, and then in preparation for her long lonely watch, she took up her knitting and stepped to her cottage door. It was an old habit with her to do so, after her last touch of tidying had been done, and even the traces of work put out of sight for the day, thus to rest and freshen herself before closing in for the night. The evening itself was both fresh and restful. There had been a soft gentle shower, such as brings out all the sweetness of

the early spring, for the earth, newly refreshed, was giving out in turn its still young, new odours, mixed with the delicate breath of the wallflower and thyme. The sun still touched the burnished leaves of the holly tree which grew before the window, the honeysuckle twining among its branches, and showed the hedges beginning to take on their new dress, and even the still faint new life that was beginning to colour the fields that lay there unrolled for many a mile. But it was fast leaving all these, and had already retreated from many of the nooks in the far-off hills, only leaving their outline traced in a line of glory along the sky. Molly's own face was hardly so familiar to her as that landscape. A hundred times had she stood and seen the sun go down behind those hills, a hundred times had her mind escaped away swifter than on the wings of a bird beyond that rocky barrier. Nay, how often she had seen the world grow new again and heard the birds rejoice over a new life. And now they were at it again, and the soft air swept past her ear like some old familiar song of her childhood. And her heart was stirring too with a new life that had its way to fight through the death of so much that had gone before, that to her it was

no such peaceful resurrection. The scene so changeless, and yet so constantly changing, pressed home to her heart with strong emphasis, the changing nature of her own life. She could remember a merry child, clapping her hands as she watched the rainbow dying out on the hills, and crying,

“ Rainbow, rainbow, rin awa hame,
A’ your bairns is dead but ane ”;

And then a laughing girl, standing there with Tom at her side, and wondering how people could talk of the world as a sad or weary place; and then a young mother, who had lost her first baby, looking at the setting sun, and feeling as if her sun had set for ever, and thinking like Adam in the poem, “that the first night was the last day.” And could all those really be herself ? She felt as if they were so many persons, whom she could look back on with pity, or with a smile, almost indeed as if they were figures in a dream, or a tale she had read ; and between her present self and them, many selves seem to interpose. And yet in the few minutes she stood there, the peacefulness of the evening rested her, and the glory from the hills cast some of its radiance on her. It

used to be only into the unknown that she escaped over their wall, that dark limitless country which contained Willy. Now the golden glory embodied to her the better country, a country of which some few features were known to her, and of infinite value and beauty, others unknown but of undying interest. And there came into her mind one of the verses she had read in Fred's little book, "the world passeth away and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever." So she stood and knitted, and drank in the comfort and the hope, and then softly shut the door and went back to her little patient.

But her adventures for the day were not yet over. She had not sat many minutes when in the stillness of the evening she heard the latch of her garden gate open, and afraid lest any of the neighbour's children should be coming to pay her an untimely visit, she hastened to the door to send them away. Here she stopped and looked at her visitor, who had got no farther than the gate, and who stood looking at the now faint golden line of the Cheviots as Molly had looked at it a few minutes before. So she had time to look at him. He was a soldier, much taller and

broader than her Willy, and his curly hair much darker. A short dark beard gave him an unsoldier-like appearance, and his dress was soiled and even torn. But it only appealed the more strongly to Molly's heart. Willy might be travel-stained and ill as this man evidently was. It might even be one of his comrades paid off, or on sick leave, and bringing her news of him. After her first surprise she stepped hastily forward, and at the sound of her footstep on the gravel the man languidly turned. As he did so his eyes fell on Molly—blue eyes unchanged by years or climate, and it needed no more. It did not seem so much that she ran to the gate, as that she was transported there, and with a cry of Willy ! Willy ! ringing wild and yet wilder through the still air, for the first time in her life Molly fainted. It was but for a moment that her senses reeled, and then it was she who upheld the feeble footsteps of her son. And even in that first moment it allayed the excitement, and brought both a glow and a softness into her joy, to think of the Ear that had been open to her cry, and the Hand that had brought Willy there. For as it has been said, there is nothing that will so break the waves of a tempestuous flood of joy, as

"that gentle emotion beneath which the eye is cast down before the unseen eternal Benefactor of all hearts And if those who have died of joy had but been softened by thankfully gazing aloft, they would either not have died at all, or at least would have died of a sweeter rapture."

But she scarcely knew whether it was not a dream when she saw him seated in the arm chair at the fire-side, and at first there were few words on either side. It was enough that he was there, and her heart had not room for any other thought. Later, when she had gone, as she did times without number, to look at him after he was asleep, the sight of the face, paler even than it had looked at first, struck terror to her heart. The lines were so deep, the temples so sunk, the whole attitude showed so much exhaustion. And Molly knew how to read such signs as well as most people. But he was worn with fatigue as well as illness. Home would soon bring colour to his cheek, and vigour to his step. But it was well for her that she had not time to dwell uninterruptedly on any one thought that night. Even during those first minutes when her joy seemed so keen as to absorb her whole being, the moans of her little patient drew her to his

side. It was no wonder if she doubted whether she was in her waking, sober senses as she passed from one to the other, or from the table where she was setting out everything she could think of to tempt Willy's appetite, to her little inner-room where she was getting ready his bed. She would not trouble him to speak till he was rested, but came restlessly back and forward during the course of her preparations to stroke his hair and to watch him eat his supper. In truth this last business did not make much progress except at such moments. "But it's rest he needs," said Molly to herself. And Willy made no opposition when she proposed that he should go to bed at once. He even allowed her to bring warm water and bathe his poor wearied feet, but when she came and put the blankets round him, he drew her head down, sobbing "Oh mother, mother, how did I ever leave you?" But Molly only softly stroked his face saying, "Whisht then, hinny, thee maun rest now and thou'l tell me it all by and by."

So the day that had found Molly alone, and still feeling more desolate than she used, before the little source of sweetness of which she had been deprived had found its way into her life, left her with her two

dearest treasures under her roof and in her keeping? In her keeping? Aye, but could she keep them, they both looked so terribly like slipping from her grasp? But as she knelt by Willy's bed, gazing at the face that looked so death-like in its repose, there suddenly came before her the picture of that other only son of a widow, recalled from yet deeper sleep. She seemed to see the funeral procession like so many she had witnessed in the course of her wanderings; the friends carrying the still figure on the bier, the weeping mother following behind. Then came the compassionate voice, "weep not," and the simple words that made the dead arise, and the care that he should be delivered to his mother. "And oh, will He not have compassion on me too," she thought, "the dear lamb is so sure always that He loves us all." And in the very extremity of her need, and the utter failure of all other help, Molly was driven as it were to cast herself on the one power which was strong enough to avail her. And this time she cried not as to a God afar off, but to the God that had raised the widow's son, that had listened apparently to every prayer offered to Him on the earth, and had never sent any empty away. And again and again she said to her

self “ He hears me ; and he is good.” And in leaving the matter here she found herself like Hopeful in the river : though the waves and billows might go over him yet he felt the bottom and it was good.

The next days were very full to Molly ; neither heart nor hands could have held much more. Willy was very ill, and the doctor did not say much to give her hope. And meantime the fever pursued its way with Fred, giving Molly a sort of feeling of its being a strong but subtle enemy that kept so skilfully out of sight that she could get no chance to grapple with it. For she could do so little but watch, and meantime poor Fred seemed such a feeble little plaything in the grasp of his deadly foe. At times he cried wildly to her when she was standing there at his bed-side, “ Molly, Molly, I’m lost, find me Molly, find me ! ” And sometimes he would shudder, and cry in a hoarse whisper, “ There was blood on her dress—did you not see it ? ” And then he would fling himself almost out of bed crying out that he saw fearful men coming. Or he would be in the jungle and hear the jackals. And sometimes he would speak rapidly in a tongue which she knew was some Indian dialect, and of which Willy caught the meaning now and then. Evidently the

scenes they had hoped were almost faded from his mind came back and haunted him. And Molly shuddered as she heard him going over again all those horrors from which she felt so powerless to rescue him. And over and over again came like a sort of chorus, "I'm lost Molly, find me!"

Every day his uncle came two or three times to hear how he was getting on, but he would turn away suddenly, and walk quickly up the road, whenever the hoarse changed voice reached his ear. And old Campbell brought stores of soup and cordials and every imaginable delicacy, each one of which she thought had some peculiar virtue above all the others she had concocted. And on Willy the rest and nursing seemed to tell at last, and he would even insist on his mother's lying down while he sat in the big easy-chair, ready to call her if it should be necessary. And he would have a cup of tea ready for her when she awoke, and something that he would fancy she could eat. And so the days wore on, and through them all Molly kept saying to herself, "He is good ; and He is able." And sometimes she would make Willy read her a chapter, and would wonder how it was possible that she had heard him read these same words when

he was a boy, with so little of any other feeling than one of pride that her boy was such a grand scholar. Now what would she have given, or what would she not have given to have had him again a boy at her knee. Then it had been so natural and easy to teach him all she knew, and to speak to him heart to heart on any subject. And her words had not passed idly by him as too often mother's counsels do, for he as well as others had unconsciously felt and submitted to the force of her character, a force mainly due to its truthfulness. She never meddled with things she did not understand, and so her words had always a meaning. And alas, of this subject, which now she felt to be the most important of all, she had had no understanding. But a few weeks ago the cry of her heart had been that she should have Willy back. Now it seemed but a little thing that she had him there beside her, while as yet God had not "received His unthrifit home." He was yet she felt in a far country, and the language that should have been familiar to his childish ears was an unknown tongue to him. And to herself it was still too strange for her to use it naturally. Every psalm seemed to meet her need, every story and saying from the gospels to

break her heart with the love they unfolded. But though her very manner showed Willy that she relished the words, and drank them in as something more refreshing than her necessary food, she could not overcome a certain shyness of speaking to him about them. A gulf seemed set between them on this subject, which she knew not how to bridge over ; and though they quickly fell back into the old familiar intercourse, and talked freely about every thing else, of the one thing that filled her heart she never spoke. Or if in her eagerness she let fall a word now and then, it was met with silence and reserve. His story was soon told, indeed there was little to tell, and on this subject he had no reserves. Once he had written, and receiving no answer (for Molly had never got the letter) he had tried to harden himself by thinking she had cast him off. The first step in a downward course is the most difficult, and for some time in changing scenes and new company he had managed pretty well to stifle recollection. But even before illness came, the voice of truth had made itself heard again, and had told him his mother had never forgotton him. But now remorse tried its part, telling him he was a wretch who had probably

broken his mother's heart, and that it mattered very little what he might do after that. But sick and in hospitals, the longing to know the truth grew, and became so intense, that it seemed incredible in how short a time he had made his way home, considering the means he had at command. He had never been nearer home than the south of Ireland ; and could never overcome his reluctance to write to any one at Beaufort to ask news of his mother, so that from the day he left till the evening he found himself at the garden gate again, he had heard as little of her as she had of him.

And now it seemed as impossible to do away with the habit of years, as to cancel the years themselves, and to change the world-worn, sin-worn man into the obedient docile child. But in her troubles Molly was herself becoming more and more a child, though she knew it not. She was, indeed, too much absorbed in her two treasures to have many thoughts to spare for any other subject. But her inability to do anything, drove her again and again to Him who can do all things, and she was quickly learning what it is to pray without ceasing, since it was only in this way she could hope to reach Willy's heart. She was

finding also, by degrees, that whereas she had set her heart on many things, and been deceived, here at least her confidence could not be mocked. Whatever weakness there was in her, there was strength enough in God ; whatever her mistakes and shortcomings had been, He remained ever the same, able to save to the uttermost.





CHAPTER V.

“ ‘Tis a perfect picture to see him lie,
As if he had supped on dormouse pie,
(An ancient classical dish, by the bye),
With a sauce of syrup of poppies.”

AT last, one day late in May, Fred wakéned up, looked about him, and dreamily wondered where he was. At first he thought he must be in the ship again, for nothing was to be seen but walls all round ; the walls, in fact, of Molly’s press-bed. But instead of ceaseless noise and motion, everything was perfectly still, and presently his eyes travelled round to the other side, and there they found plenty to employ them, but everything was as strange as his bed. There was no carpet on the floor, except a narrow strip in front of the fire. Just at the head of his bed was a sort of dresser, with rows and rows of plates set on their sides, in a rack above ; and over that again were rows and rows of coloured basins,

piled up, in what seemed to Fred, a very striking and artistic fashion. He tried to count how many there were, but whenever he got to three, they all mixed up, and he could not count any more. So he gave up trying after a few attempts, and concluded he would be able to do it better from the fireside. Released from the fascination of the basins, his eyes travelled at once to the opposite end of the room, to the window, which was shaded partly by a yellow blind, and partly by a little white muslin curtain. There was a deep window seat, in which were several pots with geraniums, hydrangias, and other gay flowers, and a broad-leaved creeper had made its way up one side, and half-way across the top of the window. Curtains of blue and white stripe were looped back on each side, and across the top was a drapery of the same with a fringe of old-fashioned net work, with fluffy balls. But it was quite a new fashion to Fred, and he thought it lovely. On the table which stood in front, a large grey cat was stretched out at full length, with her nose in a little chink of sunshine that got in past the edge of the blind. Then down at that corner of the room was the door, which was open, and showed an outer door also partly open, and

through the opening came a flood of bright sunlight, making a golden pathway right across the floor. Then the wall receded, so that the room was broader, and in the angle formed by the recess stood a wooden settle. It looked nice and shady just now, and must be nice and snug when it was cold, for it was just at the fireside. On the opposite side was the largest easy chair Fred had ever seen, delightful for playing houses in he thought, with large projecting sides, and covered with stuff like the curtains. On one side of the fire was what he knew, from his experience in wash-houses to be a boiler; on the other side a round door, which he equally well knew to be an oven. There was a little hob on each side of the fire, and on one of them stood a tiny porringer. Opposite the bed stood a tall, imposing-looking clock, with a bunch of flowers painted on the face so beautifully that Fred thought he would like to copy it.

But where was he? And why did every thing seem asleep. Far, far away, down somewhere on the earth he thought it was, he heard a man speaking to his horses. The only sound he heard besides was a tiny, little rippling, like the voice of his favourite

little burn, but it sounded far off, and low, as if it was too sleepy to sing any louder, or run any faster. The fire too seemed to be falling asleep: it had got down to the lowest bar, and looked as if it did not care to keep it up much longer. Every thing was so new and strange that he felt as if he must have floated off into some quite new state of existence, but he was so languidly happy that he did not seem to have any regrets. Only some things were the same. There was the cat and there were cats in the world he had come from; and there was the clock, and he looked less kindly on the clock, though to be sure it might be somehow different from the one that stood on the nursery chimney piece, and which he looked on as his natural enemy, unrelenting at bed time, and not to be coaxed into bringing any treat a minute sooner than it chose. But suddenly while he was looking at it, a little bird burst out, at a small door in the clock face, said Cuckoo, Cuckoo, in a very rapid and business-like manner, and instantly disappeared, and immediately after, it struck two o'clock. Then Fred understood it all at once. It was fairy-land, and this was an enchanted bird.

He had just settled this point, and was wondering

where the princess could be, for of course this was a Queen's palace, when the door creaked a little, and in stepped Molly, balancing her *skeel* on her head with one hand, the other planted in her side, exactly as he had seen her a hundred times before. She walked right up the golden pathway, and was passing to the inner part of the house, when she suddenly became aware of Fred's eyes wide open, and looking at her. She hastily set down her skeel, and stepped up to him with a strange, glad look on her face, "How art tha' now, hinny?" she said, quietly, "Oh, I'm quite well thank you," said Fred, "but are you the princess?" "The what, dear?" said Molly. "The Princess?" and is this your palace?" "To be sure it is," said Molly, smiling, "and you're my little king : but you must take this ;"—giving him something out of the little porringer,—"and I'll tell you all about it when you are better." That's why she always calls me her king, thought Fred. So he turned round to think about it, and immediately fell sound asleep, and forgot Molly, and the beautiful curtains, and even the enchanted bird.

When Fred next awoke, the fire was burning up

brightly, a candle stood on a table in front of it, Molly sat in the corner of the settle knitting busily, and opposite to her in the big easy-chair was a tall pale man with the cat stretched out on one of his knees. Of course this did not surprise him in the least; but it all looked so cozy, that for a little while he was quite content to lie still and look at it all. It was not many minutes however till Molly, lifting her head, saw that he was awake, and she was immediately at his side with the porringer again. "Who is the man, Molly?" he then asked in an eager whisper. "It's Willy, hinny,—Willy come home again." "Willy! but Willy is a big boy, and he's a man!" "Yes dear, but its Willy, and he's grown into a man while he was away. Now you must take some soup, or you know you'll never grow into a big man." "But I'm not hungry, and soup is for dinner, said he," never taking his eyes from Molly. "Well dear, you've not had your dinner yet, you know." "Do I live here now?" said Fred, adroitly changing the subject. "Yes, and you have to do everything I tell you, the doctor says." He appeared very well satisfied with this arrangement; so when Willy had put her hand under his pillow and lifted up his

head he took several spoonfuls of soup, and said it was very good.

By this time Willy had put down the cat and got up and stood beside the bed. After looking at him a little while, Fred said, "Has your wrist still got the mark where you cut it with the sickle when you fell out of the tree?" For Molly had told how Willy had climbed a very high beech, to get down a sickle, which a mischievous imp of a boy had stolen from an old man, and hidden there; and how he had come down a good deal quicker than he intended, cutting his wrist to the bone, and breaking one of his arms in the descent."

"That I have," said Willy, showing the great seam, which Fred looked at with the greatest interest. Then looking at him a little longer, he said, "I knowed you was coming, you know." "Did you," said Willy, smiling. "And how did you know that?" "Oh, Molly and me asked God to send you, you know; so I was sure you would come. I should like to kiss you." Willy immediately stooped down and kissed him twice, and Fred tried to put his arms round his neck, but somehow failed to get them so far. "Molly, do you know," he said, "my arms is very heavy, I think somebody must have put some lead in

my bones since I fell asleep." Well, hinny, you must just fall asleep again, and eat all the good things I give you, and your arms will soon not be so heavy," was Molly's answer as she tucked him up again. And though he intended just to lie and look at Willy and her and the cat, he very soon fell asleep again, and slept for several hours.

But for many days his arms still continued to be very heavy, and by and by he began to discover that the feeling was not confined to his arms. One day when he was watching Molly lift her little round potatoe-pot from the fire on to her triangle, as she told him the little wooden thing she placed it on was called. "Oh Molly," he said, "I wish I was a triangle." A triangle! and what should you wish that for hinny?" "O 'cos, you see, one side's always tired before the other gets rested, and if I had another there would be more time—for I could lie all round, you know." Molly saw the force of this, but could only promise that every day there would be less need for so many sides, if he only went on to take everything she gave him. For some time this was no easy matter. The most tempting and savoury morsels *which* Campbell daily supplied seemed very unin-

viting to the little invalid, and had it not been for Molly, it is probable that he would never have rallied from the exhaustion in which the fever had left him. But it seemed as if she absolutely would not let him sink. This was an age in which medical knowledge was making great strides, but when as yet no great attention had been bestowed on alleviating the horrors of being cured. No light of homœopathy had arisen to irradiate the scene, or none at least had penetrated to these islands, and even the drugs and essences were not, in which modern pharmacy makes well meaning, if not very successful, attempts at combining business and pleasure. In the youthful mind of that day there was a close connection, not altogether unwholesome, between being ill and being naughty, and there were the two classes of parents, those who made no attempt at disguising the disagreeable truth that medicine was nasty, though necessary ; and those who, attempting to do so, often made shipwreck at once of the dose, and of their own character for truthfulness. Molly actually managed to find a middle course between those two. She did not try to conceal the fact that senna was what she had in the little brown teapot by the fireside, neither did she

advert to the circumstance of its being nasty, of which Fred was well aware. She merely made a stately tea-party, at which places were laid for Fred, herself, and Tiger the cat. Willy was excused from these rites. Molly's choicest dishes honoured the occasion, and sugar from the most beautiful china, and cream from a cut crystal jug, were added to the beverage. Molly sipped hers and eat white cake to it, and Fred watching her, imitated her example, and finished by declaring it to be very good. Tiger had some misgivings, but hers was made very weak, (it always was), and the cream was of richer quality and in larger quantity than usual, so after sundry twitchings of the whiskers, she licked it up, and the repast was brought to a satisfactory conclusion. Molly's fertility in inventing motives and reasons for taking the necessary food seemed inexhaustible. It is true the motives were often very absurd, and the reasons entirely unreasonable, but they had the effect of making her patient do what she wished, and what could the most skilful logic have done more? And her plans for soothing him out of his fits of feverish restlessness were as innumerable; and her watchfulness was untiring. It seemed in those days as if she

did not need sleep ; she took so little and seemed so little the worse of wanting it. And at last she was rewarded by getting leave to lift Fred on to a bed which she arranged on the broad seat of the settle supplemented by two chairs. "Yes, Molly, my woman," the doctor said to her, "you've had a tough fight for it, but I believe you've got the victory at last—regularly turned the enemy's flank ; routed them, main body, auxiliaries and all the rest of it ; only we must still be on our guard, or we may have an awkward surprise yet." But Molly was too old a soldier not to be on the outlook for ambushes, and her vigilance never relaxed even after Fred had shown symptoms of an intention to make up for all past indifference to dinners and suppers.

To see Molly prepare those meals was one of the many delights of this new way of life, which Fred looked on very much in the light of a splendid play, got up for his special gratification, in which he, Molly, Willy, and the cat were the chief actors, and in which his uncle and Campbell were allowed now and then as a treat to take a part. With Willy his relations were most cordial, and while he was still in bed, Willy undertook the longest walk he had yet had,

and after keeping Fred wondering for a long forenoon what had become of him, he reappeared, bringing with him a bullfinch in a cage. It proved as great a delight to Fred as it was a source of disquietude to Tiger. He had also claimed kindred with Willy on the ground of soldiership. Willy did not understand, and asked if he had made up his mind already to be a soldier. "Oh no," said Fred, "I've made up my mind, but it's a captain of a steamer I'm going to be. But you know I'm a soldier now." Willy had not the least idea what he meant. "You know papa said that when I was baptised, he and mamma gave me to Christ, and He put His mark on me to show that I belonged to Him. So now I'm His soldier, and have to do whatever He says, and He has to help me. That's what the mark is for, to make us sure that we are His and that He'll help us. You see I forget so often, and things is so difficult. But o' course they're not difficult to Him, and He'll help me to remember." Molly overheard the talk, and did not know what Willy thought of it, but it was something more for her to lay up in her heart ; something more to regret in the past. How little use had she ever *got out of her own baptism*, how little had she thought

of teaching Willy to make use of his. It had been a precious token given into their keeping, a pledge by which God had, as it were, bound himself to help them ; and they had let this priceless gift lie useless in their hands, looking upon it merely as a mark of respectability. Every day seemed to open her eyes more, and make her wonder more at her past blindness. Fred had very little idea how large a part his own was, in this delightful play that was being played out around him.

His uncle's part consisted mainly in bringing everything he could think of that might help to pass the time, which in truth seemed in no danger of hanging heavy on his hands. Still the boxes of bricks, and toy villages, and puzzle pictures were very acceptable in the quiet afternoons, after he had seen all the dishes put away, and had had a little nap with the cat at his feet, and had woken up to find Willy in the easy-chair, and Molly at her stocking, waiting till the kettle should boil to make their tea. Only of course the getting of the tea was very interesting, and in honour of her guests Molly would have her wedding china out of the corner cupboard. This corner cupboard was one of the wonders of the place, the

treasures of which seemed inexhaustible. It had a glass door, and from his couch on the settle he could see most of its contents, and before he was well enough to sit up, he knew the history of almost every work of art it contained. For every dish and ornament there had a history, and was not for a moment to be classed with the plates and basins, which stood on the bink (as he found Molly's dresser was called), and which were merely for use. Besides the wedding china, there was a little mug which had belonged to the only one of Molly's daughters who had lived beyond infancy, and out of it Fred felt very much honoured to be allowed to drink his tea. And there was a beautiful little china bowl, which had been given to the same little daughter at her christening, by Fred's grandmother. And there were Easter eggs which had been given to Molly's eldest little brother, and toy cups that dated as far back as Molly's own childhood, and treasures that had been her mother's, and a china thimble that had even been her grandmother's. Indeed there seemed no getting to an end of all the wonderful things ; and the story belonging to each beguiled many an hour of Fred's weakness.

On one very great occasion, a great many of these

treasures were displayed. The colonel had come in one evening, and found them in the midst of tea ; and declared they looked so comfortable, that if it had not been that dinner was earlier than usual, and he must hasten home to it, he would have liked to take a cup with them. Fred immediately set upon him to make him promise to come to-morrow—" and we would have *such* good things, you know ; and Molly (this was in a loud whisper), wouldn't you bake a knead cake." Of course, Molly willingly promised, and though his uncle only said he would see, Fred was quite excited on the subject next day, and would scarcely give Molly time to wash up after dinner, so eager was he for the baking to begin. As the knead cakes must be eaten hot as soon as they were ready, and it was only one o'clock, it was necessary to exercise a little patience. But in truth Molly herself partook a little in the excitement. However, this by no means impaired her skill in bakery, and Fred thought that such savoury odours had never been smelt before as filled the kitchen that afternoon. And certainly his uncle never could have seen such white cakes as filled one dish, or such rich knead cakes as were piled up hot and buttered in the other.

Every article that could do honour to the occasion was brought out of the corner cupboard, and the dusting and washing of these, and the spreading of one of Molly's cherished damask napkins, and getting everything arranged to the best advantage, kept them so busily occupied, that it was not till near four o'clock, that Fred began to think it must be time for their guest to arrive. So he was perched in the corner of the window-seat that commanded a view of the road, and with the cat on his knee, began his watch, keeping up an incessant chatter all the time. Indeed he did this at most times, and it might have sometimes wearied his fellow invalid, but for the fortunate circumstance, that it often did not seem to make much matter whether he got an answer or not ; and if neither Molly nor Willy had time to listen to him, Tiger seemed to do quite as well.

Fortunately, on this occasion, his patience was not very long tried, and though he was quite sure the cuckoo must have fallen asleep inside the clock, it did give warning at last ; and just as the last stroke of four sounded, his uncle turned the corner of the road. "Oh, Molly, here he is, quick, lift me down," *he cried*, jumping up, and tumbling Tiger most uncere-

moniously out of his lap. They were at the door just in time to receive the visitor, who looked as if he enjoyed the fun nearly as much as Fred, and submitted to be hugged to an unlimited extent, after he had shaken hands with Molly and Willy, and inquired after both the invalids. Willy wished to give his easy-chair to the guest, but the colonel would not hear of it. However, as another had been sent from the hall for Fred's use, it was at last all arranged to the satisfaction of everybody. Fred was set up in a corner of the settle surrounded with cushions, Molly was opposite pouring out tea, while the Colonel and Willy, each in a large easy-chair, were served and pressed to eat by the little master of ceremonies, till nothing more could be forced on either of them. The Colonel declared that he had not eaten such cakes since he was a boy, and was so merry, and told so many stories, that he almost seemed to think he was one again. But there is a point at which the eating of even the best of cakes ceases to be a pleasure, and Fred at last regretfully saw that this point had been arrived at. But just then his uncle produced from his pocket, which had bulged out, as Fred observed, in a very suspicious manner, a box containing a

magnificent farm yard ; and in arranging the sheds and yards, and getting the cows, sheep, pigs, and poultry housed, everything else was forgotten, and he heard not a word more of anything that was said till his uncle got up, and thanking Molly. for his pleasant evening, said he must go. Before he left, however, it was arranged that if the day was fine, Fred should be allowed to go out to-morrow for a short time.

The tea-party had been a great success, and though Willy had taken no share in the preparations, beyond a smiling observation of the two busy entertainers, he seemed to have enjoyed it quite as much as they did. And the next day was scarcely less of an occasion, when, wrapped in innumerable shawls, Fred was carried out and set in the big easy-chair, bolstered up till he could hardly move. Never, so long as he lived, did he forget how the sun had shone that day, how the birds, waking up from their mid-day sleep, sang as if they could not get all their joy out, how his burnie had carried on its soft, happy rippling note all through, and how the roses, and the sweet peas, and the carnations had smelt. Never indeed did he see *the* little “button roses,” of which Molly’s garden

hedge was made, without thinking of this day. Willy came and leaned on the back of his chair, and Molly stepped in and out, and the birds, and the burnie, and the treetops sang, till Fred felt that his heart could hold no more, and when Willy came round to his side, he leant his head up against him and sobbed. Molly was beside him in a moment, but he reassured her. "Oh I amn't sorry, you know, I don't know why I did it, only I could not help it." After that they went in, but it seemed as if every day had some new delight—indeed, as if the mid-summer days were not long enough to contain all the joy that needed to be put into them. To sit at the window and see the cow milked into his own little mug, to be allowed to come to the back door in the evening, and see Molly dig her young potatoes for supper, and even at last to go out and help her—were there ever delights equal to these? And was anything ever so good as that milk, or as those potatoes, after he had seen them boiled in the three-legged pot, and Molly had served them up with butter, and salt, and pepper? He was quite sure nothing ever would or could be; and nothing he ever got afterwards made him change this opinion. Certainly no food he ever ate did him

so much good, and the pale, puny child was rapidly developing into a sturdy rosy boy. When he was a little better he made a little garden with Willy's help, and he dug and raked, and transplanted, and wheeled away rubbish in his little barrow, and grew stronger every day.





CHAPTER VI.

“ **Ane mirk night,**
Ane wilsome night,
Ane weary night,
And know not where to gae,
God be my guide.”

AT first when Fred had got leave to go out, and begin his gardening, the most of the digging and of any operation requiring strength, had been done by Willy. But gradually Fred took more and more to do, till at last his day's work was the larger of the two. Of course the child himself noticed nothing of this, and Molly would see nothing but that her darling was growing to be a brave strong lad, but Willy himself knew that as the child's strength increased every day, his own grew less. His native air had fed for a time the powers that had been so nearly exhausted, and the rest of feeling himself at home had checked the rapid progress of disease. He had

to a certain extent rallied, but beyond that one walk for the bullfinch there had been no improvement ; and he knew there would be none. But he never spoke of it to his mother. And every day she resolved to ask the doctor what he thought, and every day allowed one pretext or another to turn her from her purpose. And with a feverish anxiety she watched—watched him as he ate, as he slept, as he walked about the house or little garden, and watched still more eagerly as Fred every evening read to them from the Bible, talking and asking questions about it, and as he said his simple prayers beside them. The omission from them of the names of all near kindred always touched Molly's motherly heart : there was neither father, nor mother, nor sister to pray for. And it was one of her most dearly prized privileges, which she would not have exchanged for silver or gold, that he had taken his lately found friends into his loving little heart, and every night and every morning, thanked God for making him better, and for bringing Willy home, and prayed that He would soon make Willy well too, and would bless them all, and make them good, and would “lead them in the *way everlasting.*” This last phrase which was never

omitted, seemed to Molly infinitely expressive, and most earnest was the longing with which she joined in the petition. For daily did she feel more and more that while she could spend herself in a thousand ministrations to Willy's bodily necessities, his spirit dwelt apart, and was entirely beyond any influence from her. To herself in these days everything seemed to minister. Every reading of the Bible, every word of prayer, seemed to bring strength and teaching. Indeed she felt at times as if she were so living in the presence of God, that every commonest action of her life was His work and brought a blessing. Then her peace would be like a river. Promises large enough to cover her utmost need, and sure enough for her to cast herself away upon, would come and fill her heart. "He that spared not His own son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things." "If ye then being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him?" "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock

and it shall be opened unto you." These and a hundred others would come flocking to her mind, for now her Bible seemed full of them. She could not but wonder how little impression they seemed to make on Willy, forgetting that till lately they had been but a dead letter to herself. She forgot too, or did not know how years of familiar consent to evil deaden the spiritual nature, making the path that leads to eternal life yet narrower, and the gate yet straiter, by which alone it can be entered. His nature had not seemed more wicked than others ; he was sweet-tempered, sunny, affectionate, a favourite with young and old, and he had had no deliberate purpose of evil. He had only yielded as he thought to what his nature demanded—it could not be required of him that he should be continually curbing, and restraining, and denying dispositions which were implanted in him. And now when he looked back, all those pleasant fires which he had kindled to warm himself at, were heaps of ashes. All that was sweet in the tasting had become bitter, and nothing remained to him of the life that was to have been so bright, but a dreary wasted past, and a *blank hopeless* future. To this nature that was not

to be vexed by self-denial, nothing seemed possible but a sullen, cold insensibility. The husks on which he had fed had lost their power to satisfy, but neither had the bread of life any strength or sweetness ; it seemed to him but a stone.

It seemed to Molly that if she could only know how he felt or thought, she would be happier. He always listened to Fred reading, and often sat reading himself after Fred had gone to bed, and sometimes she saw a passage would touch him closely, though how she could not tell. One evening it was the story of the thief on the cross which suddenly brought the water to his eyes, and she was sure he turned often to it again. Another time—it was a Sunday evening—Fred had wandered through some of his favourite chapters in the book of Revelation, and had come to the description of the new heavens and the new earth. All this he read without questions ; his grave, hushed voice shewing that there had been enough even in his short experience to bring out the force of the “no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying.” But when he came to the “Behold I make all things new,” he wanted to hear something more about it ; what kind of things was it, and was it to be *us* as

well as the things. But Molly could not rightly tell, she said, and Willy only shook his head. But he sat long pondering afterwards, and Molly was sure this was the subject of his thoughts. If she only could know, or if there was any one who could speak to him. But the vicar, who had baptized him, was ill, and was not likely to be well for some time, and meanwhile a curate from a neighbouring parish came over for the Sunday services. The minister, as the clergyman of the Presbyterian Church was generally called, was a favourite of Molly's, but then Willy did not know him. Molly only knew him from working at the house, and if Willy should think him stern that would do more harm than good.

To strangers, it often seemed that he was grave even to sternness, and many people said they were afraid of him. But this only lasted till they knew him. For even those who knew him but a little, discovered that the sternness was only a mask which was thrown away as soon as you began to speak to him. Children generally found this out, even when he was quiet, and would quite freely pluck away the mask and peep in below. His own children understood it thoroughly. If they saw him pacing up and

down one of the garden walks, which might almost have been called his study, they knew that he was "making a sermon," which was the phrase in which they included all mental exercise, and they abstained from speaking to him ; nor would he take any notice of them, though his walk brought him continually back again to where they were playing. But let one of them get a thorn in her finger, or be stung by a wasp, and the sermon became a thing of quite secondary importance. Papa was the person who always took out their thorns, and tied up their fingers, and it would have been a strange thing, indeed, if such a triviality as his being at the most telling portion of his third head, should have interfered with their rights, or his being in the midst of a chain of argument which was to bring to the ground the tower of sophistry, by which some heretic was trying to climb to heaven. Or in the evening, when tea was over, and his desk brought to the table, if he was only turning over the pages of a newspaper, or taking down a book to look at a passage here and there, they were comparatively quiet. But let him once be seated at his desk, and his brows fairly knit, then they knew they were safe. They were not the least care-

ful about noise then, and would play at houses in the back of his large arm-chair, and, taking care not to jog his elbow, thought they did all that could be expected of the most dutiful and considerate of children, and felt all the self-satisfaction of conscious virtue.

And the needy, those suffering in mind, body, or estate, found him out like the children, so that for him the state of learned leisure was one known only by name. And no zeal for the truth, in general, was ever allowed to interfere with the carrying out of that particular branch of it, which taught him to love his neighbour as himself. The ignorant, and those who were out of the way, were but so many more children, stumbling and bruising themselves, and snatching greedily at this or that delight only to find that the thorns were more abundant than the fruit. And to bind up their bruises, and if possible to set the stumbling feet in a path in which they should not err, was the nearer and more certain good, for which the wider, but less sure one of convincing the gain-sayers, must if necessary wait. And yet it was wonderful how much of this he found time for as well—nay, how the one thing seemed to help the other. For *was not* all this misery only the fruit of sin and

error, and did not the burning of his heart to relieve it give wings to his words and fire to his pen, as he inveighed against the sin and unmasked the error. Then, indeed, one felt that there was in truth in his character an element of the sternness which came out at times in his expression. For has not truth, too, its stern as well as its smiling aspect? Villains of the sneaking order, would have gone half way round the parish, rather than meet him, and no putter forth of plausible errors, who had once encountered the keen-edged satire of his pen, would willingly put himself in the way of doing so again. His gravity was, in short, that of a man habitually occupied with the more serious matters of life, not of one too blind to take any note of its lights and shadows, congruities and incongruities: it was a gravity born not of stupidity, but of earnestness.

Molly did not stop to think of all this, though much of it was known to her. What she felt, was that he was emphatically *a man*, (one was indeed almost tempted to say there were giants in those days)—but at all events, he was a man, every way human, kindly, and quick to understand her wants, and also strong to take a grip of them.

Her usual place of meeting him was in his garden study, which was a sort of common ground, seeing that her hedge for drying bordered it on one side, but just now, of course, she was not going to the house. So she formed no plan, but next time, instead of passing him she stopped. He asked for Willy, and she, trying somehow to bring out what she wanted, hesitated so much, that his quick eye saw there was something she would like to say. "Well, sir," she said at last, "he don't seem to mend very fast, he has not been to Church since he came home." "I have been very busy of late, said the minister, or I should have been in to bid him welcome home again, but I suppose he could see me, if I came in some evening to hear his adventures?" "And that he could, sir, I'm sure, said Molly," and he saw that he had hit the mark.

It was not long before the visit was paid, and Fred's fit of shyness at the sight of a stranger, only lasted till the minister had asked if the bullfinch was his, and if it could whistle any tunes. It was not an accomplished bird, but Fred was enchanted to see how it put its little head first to one side, then to the other, as the minister whistled the beginning of the

old Jacobite tune, "Over the water to Charlie." It made no attempt at imitation, but whenever he stopped, gave a little note evidently intended to invite a repetition. After Fred was in bed that night, what was his delight to hear a cautious beginning of the tune, and while he lay still, afraid almost to breathe for fear of disturbing it, it was repeated again and again, till the first few notes came quite easily. Willy, got no rest after this, till he undertook to give Bully a daily lesson, and if his pupil was not very quick, it only made the interest last the longer.

To-night, however, Bully's lesson had served to put them all at their ease, and Fred came and leaned at the minister's knee, while Willy and he talked. Presently, he took up Fred's little Bible, which was lying at his hand, and seeing the name, asked if he could read. "Oh, o' course I can," said Fred. "I could read when I was quite a little boy." The minister, smiling, lifted him on to his knee, and asked him to let him hear him. "O then," said Fred, eagerly, "I'll read about making all things new, and you'll tell me about it." So he read the passage again, and then demanded what was going to be

made new. "Why," said the minister, "just what it says, a new heaven, and a new earth, and you and me among the other things." "But I'm made already, said Fred, and so are you." "Yes, but I for one should like to be made over again, and God can do it again, as easily as He could the first time, can't He?" Then he turned over the leaves of the Bible, and made the child read, "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: Thus saith the Lord thy Redeemer, and He that formed thee from the womb, I am the Lord that maketh all things, that stretcheth forth the heavens above; that spreadeth forth the earth by myself; I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins." Then turning to another place he made him read, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean; from all your filthiness, and from all your idols will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my *statutes*, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them."

"Won't that be something like being made new," he said then to Fred. "Why, yes," said the child, "and then I suppose I won't want to be naughty any more; that will be good, but still, I should like to be Fred." "And so you will be Fred, only just as you say, a Fred that does not want to be naughty. Some of us, I am afraid, would almost wish not to be ourselves; but though we have lived a long time, and wasted our life, God can make even this new to us, and give us back again the life, and the love, and the powers we have thrown away. And He can begin to do it now. Shall we ask Him?" And as they knelt down together, Fred felt as if the minister was a little child like himself, so humbly, and yet with such child-like, loving trustfulness did he speak to his Father; and Molly felt as if the prayer carried them to the very gates of heaven, and must find an entrance in, or rather, as if it brought Willy, and herself, and all of them, to the foot of the mercy seat and left them there. Then he bade them all good night, promising to come again soon.

These visits were often repeated, and it would have been hard to say which of the three welcomed them most; for Fred stayed on at the cottage, even after

he was quite well again. The doctor said, he should have change to the sea-side before going back among the other children, and at present, Molly could not leave Willy to go with him, nor was Willy strong enough to go anywhere. So it was put off till Willy should be stronger, as they said, though Willy himself knew it depended on something very different.

And meantime Fred throve apace, so that no one could have any anxiety on his account. Indeed the doctor said this digging and messing all the summer day in the open air was making a man of him, and that if he had a taste of the sea breezes before winter set in, he would probably be stronger than he had ever been. He had thrown off already apparently the nervousness that had been his chief enemy. His uncle was so delighted with the change that he could not think enough of Molly and would not hear of his being sent away with any one else. But Fred was in no hurry. His world of the cottage and the garden was quite large enough for him, and though his society consisted entirely of grown-up people with only the addition of Tiger and the bullfinch, he never seemed to weary, though he sent numberless messages

to Mabel and the baby and all his friends at home. The visits of both the minister and his uncle were great delights to him always. The minister always took the greatest interest in all his affairs, which were unfolded to him whenever an opportunity offered, and of course he always heard how Bully's education prospered. And besides, however short his visits might be, and they were sometimes very short, he had always something to say that interested Fred and kept him thinking, or wondering, or talking, as the case might be. For Molly too there was always some word of strong consolation, or hope, or teaching that lodged in her heart, comforting her at the time, and gradually fusing itself into her life ; till as time went on, and she had more and more need every day for all the strength she could find, she felt as if the very sound of the firm quick tread on the gravel, and the sight of the broad muscular figure made her stronger.

And by degrees as Willy got weaker, and as he got more familiar with the minister, his reserve gave way a little, and Molly would wile Fred out into the garden on some errand or other if she saw signs of thawing. The first time he approached the subject

at all was when he had been hearing news of an old school-fellow, who was just dead. "Ay," he said with a half bitter sigh, "but he knew what use to make of his life, he has not thrown *his* away; and though it's been short it does not seem like being broken off in the middle." "There are a good many of our lives though," said the minister, "that break off with a very ragged edge. Only there was a life that was lived for no other end than to fit into our poor little rags and remnants of life and make them something complete." "Yes," said Willy, "if one could but fit it in." "Ah, but we can't do that. It's His work, and the more of it we give Him the more we fulfil His good pleasure. Depend upon it He knows better than we do what a failure we've made of our lives, but as He tells us, 'ye must be born again,' we may just take His own words to Him and tell him, we *must* be born again. It's not in us to make all things new, any more than it was to make them at the beginning." And this time again he prayed with them; pleading God's own command for what he so confidently asked, making them feel it to be a relief that God did know their foolishness, and *that their sin was not hid from Him*, and yet knowing

their frame, pitied them even as a Father pitieh his children.

And for the time Willy would feel that possibly his own was not just the one case that this great salvation would not suit. But again the cloud of conscious guilt would arise, and hide everything from his eyes, but the misery into which he had shut himself up. So much of his sin had been committed not in ignorance but wilfully as he told himself. He let fall something of the kind to the minister one day when Molly and Fred had gone out to gather some chickweed, to show how cleverly Bully picked out the seed. "That's one of the devil's favourite lies was the answer—there are no distinctions drawn between one sin and another in the Bible. It was for sin Christ died, but the devil will make you believe yours is just the sin that He cannot save from. Why not make your appeal to God against His enemy and yours? Stronger is He that is for you than all that can be against you." "Ay, but I have not the faith that can remove mountains." "No," said the minister, "I suppose there are no mountains that it would be useful to remove now, or somebody would get faith to do it; but if you have only as much faith

in God as in yourself, you must believe that he does not make promises that mean nothing. Oh Willy," he said, changing his tone, "none ever put their trust in Him, and were confounded. He knows exactly what you need, as neither yourself nor I can know, and it's just for those exact circumstances He has made provision. Don't believe the devil's lie rather than His truth—promise me that you will ask Him to teach you Himself." Willy paused and then said yes.

But it was not often he spoke, even so much as this ; he was more frequently quite silent, and the minister would read a little to them, or make Fred read. Sometimes, it would be only a text or two from Fred's treasure-book which of course was shown him, or a new hymn from it ; for Fred thought nobody made them sound so well. One of the hymns, which they thought must have been made by his mother, Molly found copied out by Willy, and laid in the leaves of the big Bible, where he had also put bits of paper marking some of the texts of the little book. Finding that Willy had copied it, Molly asked often for it, and the Colonel coming in one day when they were reading, begged they would go on. So the minister read :—

“ Jesus, Saviour, pity me,
Clinging to Thy cross ;
Ah, if I should lose this stay,
Or if thou should'st turn away,
’Twere my deadly loss.

“ Trodden under foot, I lie
In the mire of sin ;
Satan’s slave, I strive in vain,
For I cannot break my chain,
Nor my freedom win.

“ Pierced with all his venom'd darts,
To Thy feet I fly ;
But my wound is sharp and deep,
To my life foul poisons creep,
Save me, or I die.

“ Shades of death weigh down mine eyes,
I cannot look to Thee,
Strength to clasp Thee I have none,
All, all but my need is gone,
Thou must uphold me.

“ Scattered are the powers of hell,
If a look Thou give ;
Lay on me Thy bleeding hand,
New created I shall stand,
And my soul shall live.

“ Evermore to know Thee near,
That were all I need,
Then the light I dare not meet
To my eyelids would seem sweet,
Life be life indeed.

“ Blest were then the rage of foes,
Blest my sorest loss,
Blessed ev'n my deadliest wound,
If a refuge I have found
Here beneath Thy cross.

“ Lend Thou, then, a pitying ear
To the needy's call,
Keep me 'mid all earthly things,
Where Thy cross its shadow flings,
My Life, my Lord, my All.”

The Colonel listened with the tears in his eyes, to the legacy of the poor young sister he had loved almost with a father's affection. It was not the first lesson he had learned from the same source. At one time, he had been inclined to think that Bob and his young wife rather over-strained things. It was just the one fault he could find in either of them, this touch overmuch of righteousness. But, when the news of their death came, he would not have dispensed with one proof of how much their affections

were set on things above, and the one fault, became his most precious recollection. And before this feeling had time to cool, Fred had arrived, with his familiar and child-like talk about unseen things, giving him the same feeling that it had given to Molly, that he had been dealing with real things in a very unreal, conventional fashion. And the sayings of the little book, came to him like a voice from the other world, to confirm the truths that his brother and sister had held so dear, and had taught their child.

He met the minister frequently again at the cottage, and the knowledge that one of the little group must presently be where all things would take their just value and proportion, gave a soft seriousness to all their intercourse. They had met often before, but there had never been anything like an intimacy between them. The Colonel was rather proud, that Beaufront could boast of possessing so learned a man, and often said, that of all the people he had ever met, (and he had mixed with a very varied society, both at home and in India), he had never met any one so witty as the minister. But after this, his feeling went much deeper, and as it

was quite mutual, a very cordial friendship sprung up between them.

There seemed, indeed, to be some softening influence in the very air of the cottage at this time. Campbell, would drop in of an evening, to see how they were getting on, and would often listen to the Bible reading, as she had sometimes done at home, when Fred read to Molly. And somehow, she began to see more of the exceeding breadth of that commandment which she had known so well all her life. It was as if the seed sown in her earliest years were watered afresh, and yielded a more abundant harvest. She began to feel that it was but a scanty return she had given in proportion to her opportunities, and often, as she returned home, she would think how true it was, that these things were hid from the wise and prudent, and were revealed to babes. She saw that to enter into spiritual as into natural life, one must become a little child.

And so the summer days passed on into autumn, neither hastening for all Molly's eagerness to see the day when her hope for Willy should be realized, nor tarrying for all her fear of the one that should take *him from her*. For she saw it now, though still

there was no speaking of it between them. They both understood. And first, there was the getting up late and going to bed early, and gradually there came the day when he was not able to get up, though he still could talk to them a little, and liked to see Fred building with his bricks on the floor of his room. And sometimes Fred would sit on the top of his bed, and tell him how beautiful his garden was now, and how he hoped the flowers would not be over before Willy saw them. Or he would say some of his hymns to him, or read a few verses, and always he came and said his prayers beside him, and gave him a good-night kiss, the last thing when he was ready for bed.

And still the word for which Molly yearned never came. "But God knows them that are His," the minister said to her, "and He often sees them where we can't see them. We can only pray, and nothing is too hard for Him. 'If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.' But it is your grief that speaks, and 'our passions are by birth atheists and unbelievers.' It is faith that overcometh, and Molly, you must overcome." And Molly prayed, oh how earnestly. She had given up almost

praying for his life ; the other seemed so much more important, that it filled all her powers of wishing. At last his weakness became so great that it was only at times they could speak to him, and she was forced, as her only refuge, to the knowledge that God could speak to him, even when his senses seemed wrapped from intercourse with them. All unconscious as he was of her voice and presence, she knew that he could not be beyond the reach of the voice of his maker. And now she never left him. Once or twice she had lain down while old Campbell or some kind neighbour, who had known him from childhood, would watch by him. But now she could not lose an hour or even a minute, for who could tell at what moment he might awake to consciousness, and be able to speak to her.

On one of these last days when Fred was sitting on his bed, only looking at him this time, as sometimes he would do for an hour at a time, Willy opened his eyes and evidently tried to say something. Bending down, Molly made out the words “Read—the thief,” and Fred read to him once more that instance of the extrekest need to which the love and *power of the Saviour* of sinners could reach ; that

proof, rather that they are beyond all limit, except such as is set by the other perfections of His divine nature. Molly heard afterwards in the midst of the panting breath, "Lord remember me—remember me," and the mother's heart went lovingly up to that Father in heaven from whom her breathing and her cry were not hid.

Fred understood at last that Willy was not to be well any more, was never to see the flowers he had helped to plant, or to hear the bullfinch finish its song. And many a tear he shed, and his games had lost all their interest. Sometimes his uncle, fearing for his health, would come and take him for a walk with him. But what was in itself such a delight was almost a weariness to him now, so eager was he to get back to Willy. And he begged so hard to be allowed to stay beside him, that Molly had not the heart to keep him away, and many a time his prayers, so simple and so confiding, brought back to her heart the peace that had been swept away by some sudden tempest of her grief. All her neighbours were kind ; and Marjory wrote offering to come, for she dearly loved Willy. But Molly knew how difficult it was for her to leave home, and she could not have given

up her place even to Marjory ; so she did not come. The colonel was in often two or three times a day, and the doctor came regularly, and was full of interest and sympathy, though he knew his skill could do little now. The minister's visits were almost daily, but it was seldom that they could tell at last whether Willy recognized him, or understood his words or not. The expression of his face fixed into an intense, anxious gaze, which never relaxed. And even when his eyes were closed, there was still the drawn, pained look that seemed to indicate that the spirit shut up within that silent, motionless form, could find no place of rest. The minister would say some short verse in a clear, distinct voice, and in a few strong simple words would commit him into the hands of God. It seemed to roll the burden over on him, and Molly felt that it was a token of special loving kindness that such a friend had been raised up for her need.

One evening Campbell had been in with Molly, but had left promising to look in again early in the morning, and Molly was alone. Some hours had passed, when Willy suddenly opening his eyes, said to her, "Have I been sleeping ?—why have you let

me sleep? I have no time to sleep, I must make haste and be gone,—but it's so dark, so dark, and I cannot find the way. *Can nobody show me the way?*" He spoke in a clear rapid voice, but there was the same searching, anxious look that had become habitual, and that Molly would so gladly have laid down her life to remove. Fred awoke and hearing Willy's voice, besought so earnestly to be allowed to come beside him that Molly wrapped him up and brought him to Willy's bed. He was still muttering in broken sentences, "so dark, so dark, and I *cannot* find the way." Fred crept up beside him and stroking his face, as his fashion was when he saw any one in trouble, he said to him in a loud voice, "God sees in the dark, Willy; He'll take hold of your hand and shew you the way." And as he did not understand Willy's not answering him, he continued repeating in a voice half frightened, and half soothing,—"God sees in the dark; He sees every where; He knows the way." Willy's eyes turned as if he half understood, and as Fred kissed him again and again, Molly thought he was partly conscious of it. But he did not speak again for some time, and when Molly stooped down to catch

the next whispered words, she shivered as she heard them come slowly, dropping as it were from his lips, "When shall I arise and the night be gone?" At the same moment the first streaks of dawn broke through the half open shutter, and the mournful, pathetic twitter of the early awakening birds was heard. It was not the first time by many that Molly had experienced the chill of that morning-hour after a night of watching, but never, as it seemed to her, had she felt a cold so penetrating or so icy; and as she wrapped Willy more closely, she thought his face by this wan, cold light looked more ghastly, and more sharp and intense in its expression of anxiety than ever. In after years when she looked back on her life, that hour stood out marked unmistakeably as the darkest in her history. Would that look never change? and was she to be left with this as her remembrance of her son? "Oh that I knew where I might find him, that I could come even to His seat—Oh that I might have my request; and that God would grant me the thing that I long for!" This was her cry.

Just then, when despair was struggling for the *mastery*, a knock came to the door, and the minister

entered. He took in all at a glance and his first words were to Molly, "Oh thou of little faith wherefore did'st thou doubt. Molly you must overcome." Then kneeling, he again brought Willy as it were like the man sick of palsy, and laid him at Jesus' feet, praying that he who came as the dayspring from on high, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, would indeed guide their feet into the way of peace.

When they rose he stood for some minutes looking at Willy, and no sound broke the stillness for Fred was awed by the presence which he felt without understanding it; and only lay with his face close to Willy's, and his little arm thrown over him. Suddenly Willy half rose in bed, and crying in a loud voice, "O Saviour find me!" he sank back exhausted. Then there broke over the poor, troubled anxious face, an expression so brilliant in its triumphant surprise and joy, that instinctively Molly turned to see if the sunshine had suddenly broken through. But it was an illumination from no earthly source, and they could but stand and look. For some minutes it remained, then toned down into a look of such peaceful gladness, or joyful

serenity that Molly could have stood and looked for ever. Then the eyes that had so long wandered, searching vainly as it seemed in regions hidden from them, turned to them and evidently sought an answering look. The soul that had so long been absent, looked out at them once more, no longer troubled, hopeless, self-absorbed but with the radiant serenity of one who after weariful and long tossing finds rest and home at last. It even seemed as he smiled on them, that the lips were about to confirm the glad tidings of the transfigured countenance. But as his mother bent eagerly down to catch the word for which she thirsted, it was but a sigh that met her ear; and the glad spirit that had returned for a short visit to its poor frail dwelling, as if to give them assurance of its having found a place of rest at last, left it again for ever. In haste to be gone it had smiled on them in passing, but could tarry for no longer greeting.

And Molly covered her face and wept tears, whether of joy or grief she could not have told,—tears at all events of gratitude and love. The minister said softly, “we asked length of days and

He has given him life even for ever and ever ;" and, with the sunshine now streaming in on them in all its brilliance, they knelt and gave thanks to Him who delivers the soul from death, the eyes from tears, and the feet from falling. Then the minister lifted Fred, and putting him in Molly's arms, told her he would send Campbell and left them.

In the days that followed, the child proved her best comforter, and she was happiest when they were left together, and was glad that even Marjory was not with her. She need put no restraint on herself with him, but could either be silent or could talk of Willy without fear of wearying him. And sometimes he would burst into a sudden flood of tears in the midst of something he was doing, as the recollection that Willy would never help him again, came back on him, and in trying to console the child she found her own best consolation. And after all what was this to be called a sorrow—this that was but for a night, with the assured hope of joy coming in the morning. Though the longing and aching of her heart for her boy, as she now fondly thought of him, made her often mingle her

tears with Fred's, they were sweet and healing as those she shed when she thought of their joyful re-union.

The day after Willy's death the minister came in for a few minutes bringing to Fred what was always a delight to him, a new book. It was a copy of the Pilgrim's Progress with beautiful pictures, and after showing two or three to him and telling him to read about them and tell Molly what they were about, he read one little sentence to them. "There I hope to see Him alive that did hang on the cross, and there I hope to be rid of all those things that to this day in me are an annoyance to me ; there they say, there is no death and there I shall dwell with such company as I like best. For to tell you truth I love Him because I was by Him eased of my burden, and I am weary of my inward sickness. I would fain be where I shall die no more, and with the company that continually cry Holy, Holy, Holy."

Nothing could have been more happily thought of than this gift, and the neighbours wondered sometimes when they came in to find Molly sitting with Fred on her knee, and listening quietly to his reading. *But she was following Willy to the gates of the*

celestial city and rejoicing so in his entrance in, that her quiet waiting for the time for her own "token" to arrive was scarcely deserving of the name of patience. She would go surely to him, though he would not return to her.





CHAPTER VII.

"Every place whereon the soles of your feet shall tread
shall be yours."

AS soon as it could be arranged Molly and Fred made their proposed visit to the seaside, stopping a night with Marjory by the way. And happy days they were for both of them. Molly would sit for hours with her work while Fred built castles and dug trenches and ponds, an occupation of which he, in common with other children, never tired. Sometimes they even had dinner out of doors, and Fred would build a table of sand, which though it had the disadvantage of sometimes subsiding suddenly and burying their provisions among the ruins, was yet considered to be a very convenient arrangement. When the provisions got seriously lost among the debris, Fred "made believe" they were explorers *and had hidden* them for future use, as his uncle had

told him they did ; and became most anxiously concerned lest bears should have found them, or Esquimaux. When they came to light again rather the worse of sand, he was as overjoyed as if their discovery had been the most unlooked-for event in the world. Besides being an explorer, Molly had to be Robinson Crusoe, and had a circle drawn round her which was her island. An umbrella represented her hut, and she was expected to shew signs of the greatest surprise and terror on discovering the mark of Fred's bare foot on the sand. She was also an enchanted princess, who could not get out of a castle which was indicated by an embankment an inch or two in height, till Fred after the most adventurous encounters with dragons, came to her release. And they were both ship-wrecked mariners, and had to kindle fires and defend themselves from savages, and put up flags to hail passing vessels. In short, there was no end to the characters in which they came out. And during the digging and building of embankments Molly had long periods undisturbed in which to review the past and look forward to the future both here and yonder. Somehow she scarcely felt as if she were separated from her dead. Here where she had more leisure

than ever in her life before, and where there was no one she knew to claim her attention, she felt as if she were holding uninterrupted intercourse with them. She felt indeed now as if she understood her husband better than ever before, and there was no longer a blind searching in the dark for Willy: she knew now where to find him, and so it only seemed as if he had gone out of her sight for a little while. And she saw now as well as believed what perhaps it is not always given us to see on earth, that God had led her forth by the right way, and that all difficulties and problems are "only places where love is so much deeper that the eye cannot pierce it, nor the line of our wisdom fathom it." She felt inclined to say like the man in the Gospel, one thing I know that whereas I was blind now I see; only she knew who it was that had opened her eyes, and who leading the blind by the way they knew not, had brought her through the darkness to the morning.

And as she sat and pondered all these things, her heart was drawn out in return, till the tide of her love arose so as to cover all the relations of her life. She longed to spend herself in loving service to those to whom she now felt as if she had given but

scant measure hitherto. Life seemed so much more full of meaning and of joy, that all she had done before was but a poor thing to offer. Now she felt as if there were but one family in heaven and earth, and it would be only natural and a joy to her to spend not only her service, but her love, and if need be, her life for any of them. Even in that quiet seaside village she found more than one to minister to, and there was such a loving motherliness in all she did that she won an instant entrance into their hearts. And how could she see them without speaking of what filled her own heart with joy ? How conceal what was the motive and spring of all her life ? How could she see any young creature growing up into life, ignorant of the best part of it, indeed of all that makes it precious ? How see any hastening out of life, without making sure that they knew they had a home for eternity.

Out of the dark stormy winter of her hope, this spring time of her love had grown, and one looking on and watching her might have thought that this also would pass—for the spiritual life like the natural one has its periods, and its losses and gains. It is not always the season of eager, energetic activity,

though some bear this characteristic of youth even into old age. And Molly was one of these, partly that it was her nature to be busy, and partly that her life had begun so late that she never, as it were, lost the freshness of youth. This full tide of her love carried her over all shyness or difficulty of any kind, there might have been in returning to her old work among her neighbours at home. Her lack of introspection helped her here too ; she did not think what she had been and how she was different. Only she could comfort them now with the comfort wherewith she had herself been comforted ; and how much better that was than anything she had had to give them before. “He knows—He surely knows she would tell some anxious mother—thee must na grieve like one that has no God to look to.” And she never lost heart or hope for them, or would let them lose it, for could any one come into deeper waters than she had been in ? or had any more reason to know that the shadow of death itself was not too deep for the eye and the love of God to pierce ? And with what a tenderness of sympathy did she feel for those lying under this shadow, almost entering with *them* into its darkness, as her yearning heart had gone

with Willy step by step, deeper and deeper down into the land where the very light is as darkness, battling with his foes, groaning under his defeats, crying for deliverance against the mighty, until through the gloom one mightier had appeared, and a loving Saviour had received him from the arms of Death. Never again could Death appear to her so terrible ; he was but a servant of the great King, and could not overstep His commands by one moment of time, or by the most trifling circumstance of his commission. How gently and tenderly had he taken Willy at last, though his shadow had been so terrible to them. She would no longer take fright at shadows, since even in the blackest of all, the wings of God overshadowed her yet more closely. Nor would she fear for to-morrow, nor let others do it. "Thou'rt trying to bear to-morrow's burdens to-day, hinny," she would say, "so it's no wonder thou'rt sore pressed down. If the burden's there to-morrow, thou'l get strength to bear it, never fear, but thou must na look to get it to-day." And it was not only in the great events of life she saw God's hand and recognized His voice. She knew that the bread of life was for every day and every hour, and that it was

not only strong enough to go through the journey of life upon, but sweet enough to "cause the lips of those that are asleep to speak."

Though she was alone she never felt lonely. "I know He'll not save my soul and leave my heart empty," she would say. And so she found it to be. For her ties with all her neighbours were closer than ever : they felt the difference and gave a deeper love in answer to her deepening love to them. Her actions had always spoken louder than her words, and she was not one to find comfort in visionary notions, so when they saw that stripped of every earthly hope, she still seemed happy, they believed not only that she was so, but that there was some solid foundation for her happiness.

And never, amid her washing, and baking, and cleaning, did it occur to her to wish for any broader path or wider means of usefulness. She only feared lest in this path by which God was leading her, she should overlook any piece of work, great or small, which He had laid in her way.

And brave, and strong, and happy hearted as she was, she was not without both her failures, and her *sinkings of heart*. But of her failures we need not

speak, since they were seen by no eye but her own, which wept over them, and that of her Father in heaven who had compassion on them. And she could always say, "Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall I shall arise; when I sit in darkness the Lord shall be a light unto me. Therefore, I will look unto the Lord: my God will hear me." And not often was her heart seen to sink either. The first time she went to the hall after her return, she went up to the nursery to see Fred, and the sight of the room moved her from her usual calmness. How much had come and gone since she had stood there before. And suddenly, as she stood, the bullfinch poured forth, in a brave confident note as if to challenge her attention, the few bars of its song, and there stopped. And the hurrying grief would not be denied a way, but surging up, swept every barrier before it, and drowned her poor heart for a time in a flood of anguish. She had generally thought of Willy, as one escaped away out of the snare of the fowler, never again to fear, or doubt, or despair. But now, in a moment, she saw the brave, confident young life cut short midway like the little birds song, never more to be taken up and finished.

But here the sunshine broke forth again ; it was not cut short, and not unfinished, but was complete as far as it was meant to be here, and was going on now in a brighter and more glorious strain.

And so it always was. The clouds were but now and then, and quickly past—the sun was always there. And Fred was still her solace and delight, and was as much at home at the cottage as in the hall. As time passed on, and school-days succeeded to childhood, the first day of the holidays was sure to find him in the big easy-chair at Molly's fireside, or on the stool at her feet, as she sat in her old corner of the settle. And her first glance would tell her how things had gone with him in his absence. He found as he advanced on his journey through life, that it was not so impossible for him to imitate the children of Israel in the wilderness, as he had imagined when he read about them to Molly. And when he found it easier to yield to his enemies, than to fight with and extirpate them ; and when he sighed for something more than the daily manna, then the old relations between Molly and himself would change, and she would give him back some of his own old lessons. Very often was that word on her lips that the

minister had given to her when it seemed impossible to obey it. " You must overcome," she would say to him, " it's not at some other time you are to be brave and strong, it is this very day, this very hour ; and oh, laddie, whatever it costs, you *must* overcome." The minister, of course, never lost his place in their affections, but was always one of their very innermost circle, and while his strength continued to be a tower for them, he in his turn felt enriched and refreshed by their love.

On their way home from the sea-side, Marjory had let Molly bring her name-daughter with her. She was not very strong, and would be the better of the air of home, as Marjory still fondly called Beafront. And Mary proved a true daughter in nature, as well as in name, and was already a deft and skilful housewife, though she was only fourteen. And little Kitty Go-lightly came often to see her ; and fired with emulation, became gradually a most motherly little woman, and would do such miracles of tidying at home, that her mother was fain at last to redd herself up, not to put the house to shame ; so that her husband began to wonder who and where he was.

And so the circle widened. And when Mary was

old enough, she was taken into service at the hall, still living with Molly, so that she was never without company at her fireside, or some one to notice if she was less fit for work than she used to be. And she had still some one of her own, besides those that were out of her sight, to bid good-night to when she lay down, thanking her Father for the day's work and the night of rest. And so her happy years passed, brightening more and more into the perfect day ; and always "come sunshine or come rain," as Campbell used to say, "aye the owercome of Molly's song was :—

‘ Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me :
And in God’s house for evermore
My dwelling place shall be.’ ”





